

DETOUR THROUGH ACTS: ONLY ONE MASTER

by Michele Hershberger

KEY VERSE:

"But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority.'" Acts 5:29

FAITH STORY:

Acts 5:12-42

FAITH FOCUS:

The little band of believers is growing bigger and stronger every day. This is threatening to the high priest and other temple officials. Filled with jealousy, they arrest the apostles and put them in prison. But during the night, an angel opens the prison doors and tells them to stand in the temple and continue preaching the Word. When the temple officials find out, they are amazed and angry, but can do nothing to the apostles for fear of the people. Just as in the story from chapter 4, they command the apostles to remain silent about Jesus. Peter answers, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." The Rabbi Gamaliel encourages the rulers to let the apostles go, for if this movement is of God, nothing can stop it. So they have them flogged and release them.

SESSION GOAL:

To persuade students to obey God before any human authority.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- List situations that would make suffering for Christ easier.
- Summarize the previous stories from the book of Acts
- List unusual events in Acts 5:12-42
- Debate the reasons for and against the apostles defying the temple authorities
- Write down choices they have to make that concern obeying God rather than human authorities.
- Go to a prayer station of their choice for anointing or prayer.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles
- 2 The book *Would You Rather ...?* by Doug Fields, Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, Zondervan, 1995.
- 3 White board and markers or a chalkboard and chalk
- 4 A judge's panel or table for a mock courtroom scene and a gavel
- 5 Ask a person who served as a conscientious objector to war to come speak to the group about his experience. Apply, Option 1.

- 6 A prayer station with anointing oil.
- 7 A prayer station where two persons are willing to lay hands on students to pray for the Spirit's power.
- 8 A prayer station where someone is waiting to pray with a student for healing.
- 9 A prayer station where paper and pens are available for students to write a letter to God.
- 10 The song *More Love, More Power*.

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (5 minutes)

After the students arrive, play the "Would You Rather" game. You may use the book *Would You Rather* by Doug Fields, or you may use the examples below. In this game, you call out two choices. People who want the first choice go to one side of the room and people who want the second choice go to the opposite side. Everyone must choose. Here are some examples. Whether you use the book or not, please end with the last set of choices.

Would you rather:

- Eat at Burger King or McDonald's?
- Die by drowning or by burning?
- Vacation in a 5 star hotel or in a wilderness camp way up in the mountains?
- Skateboard or wind surf?
- Read your Bible or write in a prayer journal?
- Eat liver or Limburger cheese?
- Do whatever God tells you to do or get flogged and go to jail?

CONNECT: (5 minutes)

Ask, "How easy was it for you to be honest on the last set of choices?" Have the youth list some things that would make suffering or persecution for God easier. For example, they may list knowing that I'll go to heaven, believing that God will rescue me, remembering how much Jesus did for me, etc. Transition into the Bible lesson by saying, "Humanly speaking, it's really hard to follow God when that means persecution. It's almost like the followers have to know something, believe something, that the rest of the world doesn't get. Be looking for that "something" as we read the scriptures."

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (20 minutes)

Ask the students to verbally review all the lessons they learned so far in the book of Acts. If you are doing this lesson in isolation, then skim chapters 1 through 4 with the students. Together as a group, list on a white board all the major events. You should include:

- The ascension of Jesus
- The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost
- A lame man is healed
- Peter and John are arrested because of this healing and told not to speak about Jesus again.
- The community of believers prospers, sharing its possessions with each other.
- Ananias and Sapphira are struck dead for lying to the Holy Spirit.

Now ask the youth to silently read Acts 5:12-42. As they read, ask them to look for parts of the story that they find unusual or surprising. When they are finished, make a list of these unusual events or things. Your list may include:

- Why wouldn't others want to join them if they held the believers in high esteem?
- Why would people want Peter's shadow to fall on them? In order to heal them?
- An angel of the Lord freed the apostles who were in jail.
- The angel told them to go right back to the temple and keep on teaching.
- The guards didn't even know the apostles had escaped.
- The temple police were afraid of being stoned by the people.
- Why were the temple officials so enraged that they wanted to kill the apostles? What was it about the story of Jesus that made them so mad?
- Why would the rabbi Gamaliel risk his reputation to say what he did?
- The apostles rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer for Jesus.
- Even though they were told to, they didn't stop teaching about Jesus.

Divide the group into two smaller groups. One group is to come up with as many arguments as possible why Peter, John and the rest of the apostles should stop teaching about Jesus and obey the temple officials. The other group is to come up with as many arguments as possible why the apostles should continue. Then come together again and have the two groups make their cases. Make this a mock courtroom scene if you want.

The first group might come up with the following arguments:

- In other places in the Bible, God wants us to obey the officials.
- They could have obeyed God by teaching and preaching, but they could have just done it somewhere else where they wouldn't get caught.
- Getting killed is just not worth obeying God.

The second group might come up with the following arguments:

- Gamaliel was right. This is a movement from God, and when you know that, how can you help but do what God says?

- Jesus was raised from the dead, so maybe God will do that for the believers as well if they get killed.
- They aren't doing anything wrong, so why should they stop?
- You can only have one master, and if God is your master, then that is the master you have to obey.
- They had such good news (sick people being healed, Jesus raised again, Spirit coming and empowering them) that they couldn't keep quiet.

Say, *"In some ways, the apostles were crazy. They purposefully defied their human authorities. They risked torture and death for preaching in the temple area—something they perhaps could have done on the other side of town. On the other hand, they had seen such wonderful miracles and had the power of the Holy Spirit in them in such a mighty way, that maybe they couldn't keep quiet. Maybe the crazy ones are the people who didn't believe. What do you think?"*

APPLY: (12–15 minutes)

Ask the students, *"Was Gamaliel right? Do you believe that Jesus is from God and that this whole movement can't be stopped? Do you believe that even today the movement can't be stopped? As they discuss these questions, push them to think about how that truth should change their lives. If Christians really do "have the real thing," what should that mean for our lives?"*

Do the "Would You Rather" game again. But this time, have the students think of choices they have to make every day concerning whether or not they obey God or human authority. Start by listing all the human authorities. Along with government and state officials, they should include their peer group at school. Popular kids at school carry a lot of "authority." Then, working in small groups, have them come up with choices such as these:

- Will you obey God or get teased by your friends for not smoking a joint?
- Will you obey God or join the army when drafted?
- Will you obey God and give most of your money away or do what society tells you and buy clothes and things that make you look like everyone else?

You don't have to play the game itself. It is enough to share the choices and talk about them.

APPLY, Option #1:

Ask a person who served as a conscience objector to war to come tell his story to the group. Ask him to emphasize that, while wanted to respect and obey the government as much as possible, when it came time to choose between fighting in a war and obeying God, he had to obey God.

RESPOND: (12 minutes)

Say, *"Obeying God rather than human authorities is not something we can do just by logically deciding to do it. The only way we can face ridicule and torture is to first experience the same*

Spirit that the early believers did. We too must have the Spirit fill us. We too, like the lame man, must experience healing. We too, like the early church must experience God in a real way. Only then will we know what Gamaliel suspected—that this thing we have is from God.”

Hold a “More Love, More Power” service. Have these prayer stations ready:

- A place where youth can go to be anointed
- A place where youth can go to have someone pray for them for healing
- A place where youth can go to have hands laid upon them to empower them for service
- A place where youth can write letters to God

End this time by singing the song “More Love, More Power.”

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

For the third time so far in the book, Luke stops to summarize community life, signaling the importance of a healthy body of believers. This summary has two new features. In what seems to be a contradiction, Luke explains that none of the rest (of the unbelievers hearing the news of Jesus) will join them, and yet great numbers are being added daily. Perhaps what Luke means here is that, because of the incredible healings and the high standards (think Ananias and Sapphira), people realize that one doesn’t join this group lightly. This is a big commitment. Believers may be persecuted. Yet, for those very same reasons, people are attracted to the community. The love for each other, the high standards, the obvious power—all these things are attractions. The apostles and their band win both fear and respect.

The second new feature is the added information on healing, particularly the healing ministry of Peter. News spreads beyond Jerusalem and people come from surrounding villages to be touched, and even to just fall under Peter’s shadow. And Luke declares that they are all cured! (Acts 5:16). The early church displays an incredible capacity for healing. In Acts 19:11-12, even handkerchiefs and aprons that have touched Paul’s skin are used to heal people. Good news about Jesus that doesn’t include an answer to the world’s misery is hardly good news. Salvation, both then and now, means rescue from physical ailment and political oppressors as well as the individual healing of one’s soul and forgiveness of sin.

All this—the healing power and the throng of converts—threatens the temple leadership. Luke says they are jealous. They arrest the apostles. We cannot be sure how many are arrested. Only Peter is named, and at least two others join him. It’s probable that most of the apostles are thrown in the local jail. In some ways, this arrest echoes the arrest in chapter 4, but again there are new features. One is the arrival of the angel of the Lord. Angel in Greek can also mean messenger, so perhaps this is a human helping them. But the phrase “of the Lord” mitigates against this. This angel frees them and bids them to go back to the temple to preach boldly. So they go back to Solomon’s Colonnade and tell about Jesus. They do so gladly, even naturally. Having experienced the reality of Jesus’ love and the outpouring of the Spirit, they can’t keep quiet.

Meanwhile, the officials know nothing of the escape and send for the prisoners. Surprise! They are not there. Can you imagine the bewilderment of these leaders? First these commoners defy their orders and preach about Jesus again and now they vanish into

mid-air? Just then a man comes and informs them that the apostles are right back at the temple—disobeying the authorities again. So, not knowing what else to do, the Sanhedrin sends temple police to haul them in. But they must be careful and do it nonviolently, for the apostles are so popular that the crowd may stone the police if they harm the men.

The High Priest himself charges the apostles, in the presence of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin is a council of Jewish men who are charged with the duty to administer justice and protect the innocent in matters of the law. The 70 members are a mixture of Pharisees and Sadducees. And what makes the apostles' crime so offensive to this group is that the apostles are publicly claiming that these same authorities killed the Messiah! In a similar statement to Acts 4:19, Peter again states, "We must obey God rather than human authority." The irony here is that the priests, elders and other members of the Sanhedrin should be making the same claim. The ones in charge of the temple should be the people most devoted to not compromising obedience to God for any other human institution. Could it be that they are so angry because Peter hit a nerve? Do they wonder if they have sold out to the Romans for security reasons?

But not all of the official religious hierarchy is evil. Enter Gamiliel. A member of the council, and grandson and disciple of the famous rabbi Hillel, Gamiliel brings a logical and moderate argument to the discussion. If this group is not from God, it will die on its own. But if this group is from God, no one can stop it and further more, those who try are actually fighting against God.

Gamiliel sights two men as examples of pseudo-Messiahs who gathered a following that dispersed after their deaths. Theudas, a common name, is probably one of many men claiming to be Messiah, a common occurrence during Jesus' day. After he is executed, his group loses hope and disbands. The other example, Judas the Galilean, is a poor choice on Gamiliel's part, for he led a Jewish party, the Zealots, and they do not die off after his execution. Nevertheless, the point makes sense and is received favorably by the Sanhedrin.

Agreeing with Gamiliel, the apostles are released with a stern warning to keep quiet. They are also flogged. This is no slight matter, as many do not survive the 39 lashes. Peter and the others, however, rejoice to be found worthy to suffer dishonor and physical pain for the sake of the name of Jesus. To the world, that rejoicing seems ridiculous, part of an upside-down kingdom that makes no sense at all. But for the believers, they see in themselves the further work of Christ. As he suffered, so also shall they suffer.

WORKS CITED:

Faw, Chalmer E. *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Acts*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993.

Munck, Johannes. *The Anchor Bible: Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Doubleday, 1967.

Willimon, William H. *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988.