

PROPER PRIORITIES
ACTS 5:12-42

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

When I was growing up, my family had a large garden. In this large garden we had a raspberry patch. One of the jobs that my brothers and I had was picking the raspberries in this raspberry patch. I like raspberries. (RASPBERRIES) In my objective opinion one of the best pies in the world is a fresh raspberry pie.

In getting to that end product there was some work involved. Raspberry stalks have prickles on them, and sometimes there were also thorns to contend with. Ideally it would have been nice to wear long sleeve shirts and gloves to pick the raspberries. But it is tough to pick berries with gloves on, and normally it was warm in berry picking season. So usually I ended up with scratches and cuts on my hands and arms.

As much as I like raspberries and raspberry pies, the primary reason that I picked raspberries is that my dad told me to do it. I didn't always enjoy it. But in retrospect I am glad that he had me do it. Giving me missions like that developed my character. If nothing else it taught me obedience and self-discipline and the value of hard work. (PROJECTOR OFF) .

The Christian life is like raspberry picking. We have a Heavenly Father who also gives us jobs to do. One of the main jobs that He gives us is being a witness for Him. We participate in some of the benefits from that. But there are also some thorns that come along with witnessing. Left to ourselves we might not do it. But our Heavenly Father commands us to do it. In the process of following His orders, we not only enjoy some tasty fruit, we also develop stronger character.

In our study of the Book of Acts we came across that command to be witnesses in the 8th verse of the first chapter. Jesus told His disciples, **"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."**

Thus far we have seen the Holy Spirit come upon the first Christians, and we have seen them being witnesses in Jerusalem. The miraculous signs and wonders performed at the hands of the apostles attracted the attention and respect of the residents of the city. We saw how Peter and John healed a lame man in the temple. Out of that miracle came further opportunities to preach. Thousands of Jews were joining these followers of Jesus. But this Jesus movement was also attracting the attention and concern of the high council of Judaism, called the Sanhedrin. They ordered the apostles to stop preaching about Jesus.

In today's passage we are going to see the thorns get a little thicker and the scratches get a little deeper. We want to see how these early Christians handled these thorns with the hope that we can learn something from their example about how we should respond to the thorns that we encounter in the garden of life.

I.

So first we are going to examine vv. 12-16 of Acts #5 as we consider THE FRUIT FROM PROPER PRIORITIES. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE FRUIT FROM PROPER PRIORITIES) In vv. 12 & 13 the author Luke writes, **"Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem."**

The Christians were still having their larger meetings in the temple in the part called Solomon's Portico. (SOLOMON'S PORTICO) It was in the temple near the entrance to the inner courtyard that Peter and John had healed the man born lame. It was here that the apostle preached to the larger crowds. It was here that the apostles were performing miraculous signs and wonders. These miracles served to validate both their message and their authority as spokesmen for the Lord.

The Holy Spirit had produced a very united group of Christians. One factor that helped produce that unity was no doubt the strong discipline that God meted out to Ananias and Sapphira. We saw last week when this couple sold a piece of their property and falsely claimed that they were giving the entire proceeds to the apostles, the Lord struck them both dead. That had a purifying effect on the church. It also produced great respect from the unbelievers that found out about it. The Jews realized that they couldn't make any halfhearted commitment if they decided to join with the followers of Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Luke continues, beginning in v. 14, **"And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed."**

Before this Luke used specific numbers to describe those added to the church. From this point on the church grows too quickly and becomes too large for anyone to keep track of the numbers. Great miracles of healing also continue to occur. Some have suggested that the Jews just superstitiously believed that Peter's shadow could heal the sick. Yet we know from the gospel accounts that people were healed by just touching Jesus' clothes. Later we will see that people are healed by getting handkerchiefs from Paul. Then also Luke tells us that "all" were being healed. It was not just those who sent checks or those who exercised a certain amount of faith or those who spoke certain words. Amazing stuff was going on here.

Notice also that the witness for Christ is beginning to extend beyond Jerusalem. There is a tremendous harvest that is taking place. Multitudes of people are coming to faith in Jesus as their Messiah. The apostles and other Christians are being faithful to the orders that they received from Christ. Their priorities are in order, and they are seeing wonderful results.

We also will see positive results when we have our priorities in order. When we are faithful to Christ's command to be witnesses, we will eventually see people come to Christ. We see that in our prison ministries and in our youth ministries and in other areas. But there are other priorities that God's Word establishes. It says that we should spend time reading and studying and meditating upon the Bible on a regular basis. If we do that, we will see our lives changed for the better. If we are faithful to commit our anxieties and needs to prayer, our losses even of mates, our faith will grow. When we are faithful to make our marriage and family life a high priority, we will see our relationships there strengthened. Family life will be improved. When we have proper priorities--- priorities that reflect God's priorities--- we will see fruit.

II.

We need to realize that we will also encounter thorns. Verses 17-40 describe THE THORNS FROM PROPER PRIORITIES. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE THORNS FROM PROPER PRIORITIES) When we do get our priorities in order, we can count on seeing fruit. But the truth is that there will also be thorns. Some people won't be happy with our priorities. Our boss may not be happy that we aren't willing to work 70 hours a week anymore. Some families may not be happy that we decide to spend Sunday mornings at church. Some people may be bothered that we talk about God and Jesus.

The one who will be most upset is Satan and his forces of evil. The Book of Acts and the Bible as a whole demonstrate that there is a spiritual war going on in this world. The forces of evil will attack those individuals and institutions who have their priorities in order, especially those who are seeing fruit from their faithfulness to Christ.

I have often seen it happen to newer Christians. A person comes to Christ, and the world suddenly becomes a different place. A life is changed, often dramatically. Spiritual growth happens, and others around see the change. Good things happen, and then suddenly he or she gets hit with thorns. The forces of evil try to trip them up. Often it is through some kind of opposition. The Apostle Paul warned, **"All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."** (1 Timothy 3:12) Many of us have probably had this experience, and that is what happens now in our story.

Beginning in v. 17 we read, **"But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison."** The Sadducees, remember, were the members of the religious party that were in the majority in the 71 seat Sanhedrin. All of the high priestly families were Sadducees. Beyond this upper level of religious and political power they didn't have much respect or popularity. They were theologically

liberal. The more conservative Pharisees dominated the ranks of the rabbis and had more influence with the common people.

So it is not so surprising that the Sadducees were jealous of the growing power and influence of these Jesus Jews. They were jealous that it was the name of Jesus that was being proclaimed and not that of the Sadducees. They were jealous that the preaching and the power of the apostles were attracting people to the cause of Jesus and not to their own. They were also unhappy about these apostles preaching about Jesus right in the temple, which was under their authority. These Christian leaders were doing it after they had been told by the Sanhedrin to stop it. So they arrested the twelve apostles and threw them in the slammer.

If you had any doubts about whether the Lord has a sense of humor, look at vv. 19 & 20: **“But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ‘Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.’ And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.”** You see, the Sadducees said that angels don’t exist, and they did not believe in resurrection from the dead. The Lord could have used other means to get these guys out of jail. But He chose to use an angel. This angel told them to go right back to the temple and do their preaching thing about a resurrected Jesus. That was nerve. These guys were extremists.

I had lunch years ago with a pediatrician who cared for our boys. This guy happened to be Jewish, and he happened to have a liberal view of theology and philosophy. At one point in our conversation he suggested that one of the problems of society is religious extremism. Some people just get too carried away with their religious views. I responded by saying that I thought that the real problem was just that a lot of people had wrong religious views. If I had been a little more on the ball, I would have asked him if he thought that people like Mother Theresa and Albert Schweitzer and Martin Luther King and Theodor Herzl, who founded the modern Zionist movement, were extremists.

The apostles were extremists. According to v. 21 they went back into the temple at daybreak and resumed their preaching. At about the same time the Sanhedrin convened. (TEMPLE 006) The Sanhedrin held its meetings right here inside this hall in the southern wall of the temple. Probably a couple of hundred yards away the apostles had already begun their preaching. So the Sadducees sent for prisoners whom they were supposed to have who were actually doing what they weren’t supposed to be doing because of an angel who wasn’t supposed to exist.

According to vv. 22 & 23, **“But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, ‘We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.’”** These Sadducees had a real security problem on their hands. A tomb that they had guarded a few weeks before ended up empty because of a resurrection from the dead that wasn’t supposed to happen. Now a guarded prison cell ended up empty because of an angel who wasn’t supposed to exist. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Keep in mind that the Sadducees and other members of the Sanhedrin were the most highly educated people in this part of the world. They were the academic elite. But they did not have any interest in truth. Their concern was for power and esteem and religious and political correctness. Unfortunately that is still often true in the world of academia today. Too many universities are willing to deny biological reality to say that boys can be girls and girls can be boys.

Stephen Meyer (PROJECTOR ON--- STEPHEN MEYER) has an earned PhD from Cambridge University in England. Several years ago he published an article in *The Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*. It has the catchy and exciting title "The Origin of Biological Information and the Higher Taxonomy Categories." His article promoted the notion of Intelligent Design, which flies in the face of the tenets of Darwinian evolution. The article was peer reviewed by other scientists before it was published.

But once it was published it also produced a firestorm of criticism. The criticism was primarily directed toward the acting editor of the magazine, Rick Sternberg, who has two PhDs in the area of molecular and biological evolution. Critics felt that a scientific periodical should never publish such an article. Sternberg was kicked out of his office in the Department of Zoology at the Smithsonian and was shunned by colleagues. You see, there was no interest in arguing about what was true in an atmosphere of free speech and inquiry. The concern was for political correctness and intimidation and the maintenance of power. (PROJECTOR OFF)

That was likewise the attitude of the Sadducees. But the Sadducees and the other members of the Sanhedrin were at a loss to know how to respond to what was going on. While they were trying to digest the news about the empty jail cell, a report came that the apostles were outside in the temple preaching again about Jesus.

According to v. 26, **"Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people."** Although the apostles refused to obey the order to stop preaching, they didn't resist those who came to arrest them. They followed the example of Jesus who had been arrested in Gethsemane.

(TEMPLE 006) **"And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them..."** This is what the meeting room of the Sanhedrin is believed to have looked like. The members of the Sanhedrin were seated in the front.

Caiaphas the high priest accuses the apostles of two things. They have disobeyed their orders to stop preaching, to the extent that Jerusalem has been filled with their teaching. Thus we see an indication that the first step of their mission has been accomplished. The Christians have largely fulfilled their responsibility to be witnesses in Jerusalem. The second charge against the apostles is that they are accusing the

Sanhedrin of being responsible for the death of “this man.” For some reason the leaders of the Sanhedrin don’t like to even speak the name of Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This charge is ironic. It is not only obviously true. But also, according to Matthew #27, the Jews had told Pilate when he was deciding what to do with Jesus, **“His blood be on us and on our children.”** At that point they had willingly accepted the blame for the death of Jesus.

According to v. 29 of our passage the apostles responded to these charges with the statement, **“We must obey God rather than men.”** This is the key to proper priorities. We have to put God first. Our standard by which we determine what it means to put God first is His word, the Bible. In this first century context there was also irony in that Peter and the rest were telling this to supposed men of God. Unfortunately religious people are sometimes the ones who are most opposed to true Biblical priorities.

In the next few verses Peter gives a brief summary of the gospel. He concludes in v. 32 by claiming that he is a witness of the things of which he speaks. He asserts that the Holy Spirit also is a witness, by virtue of the miracles which have taken place. This Spirit has come to rest in those who obey Christ, that is, to those who have responded to His call to follow Him. The clear implication is that these guys in the Sanhedrin don’t have this Holy Spirit.

Many in the Sanhedrin didn’t believe in a Holy Spirit anyway. But the claim to some kind of spiritual superiority added to the aggravation of the Sadducees. They were ready to take the apostles out and kill them.

At this point a guy named Gamaliel intervened. We know a fair amount about Gamaliel from Jewish writings outside the Bible. He was a respected rabbi and Pharisee. He was the most respected teacher of his generation. One Jewish document later said this about him: **“Since Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, there has been no more reverence for the law, and purity and abstinence died out at the same time.”** Later in the book Paul says that Gamaliel had been his teacher. Perhaps Paul was present on this occasion.

So this famous rabbi proceeds to moderate the intentions of the Sadducees. He cites two examples from the past of men who led movements that came to nothing. The first man we don’t know anything about. But the second individual, Judas, is described by the first century Jewish historian Josephus. He says that this Judas led an uprising against the Romans in 6 AD.

Gamaliel’s conclusion in vv. 38 & 39 is **“So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”** So they took his advice.”

This pragmatic suggestion had a certain wisdom about it. But Gamaliel, as a teacher of the law, should have recognized that the words and deeds of Jesus had met the requirements laid down in the Hebrew Scriptures for the coming Messiah. Instead he apparently went along with the rest of the Sanhedrin in ordering the death of Jesus. But now with more miraculous signs and wonders taking place right next door in the temple, he continues to maintain an aloofness about what has happened. He wants to be a fence sitter. At the same time, the reaction of Gamaliel as a Pharisee suggests that at least some in the leadership still regarded this Christian movement as being part of Judaism. They don't see these Christians yet as heretics. Indeed there were a number of sects within Judaism that were tolerated by the religious leaders.

The Sadducees bought the advice of Gamaliel. Since they were in the majority we might wonder why they didn't do what they originally wanted to do with the apostles. Why listen to the Pharisees? This historian Josephus, who himself was biased as a Pharisee, said this about the Sadducees: **"They accomplish practically nothing, however. For whenever they assume some office, though they submit unwillingly and perforce, yet submit they do to the formulas of the Pharisees, since, otherwise the masses would not tolerate them."** Luke indicates that the masses would have been in a very foul mood if the Sadducees had tried to execute the apostles.

The leaders then called in the apostles, told them again to shut up about Jesus, beat them, and let them go. They hoped that this Jesus thing would go away. Intimidation, however, is often not enough to make truth go away.

The kind of beating that the apostles had to endure typically involved 39 lashes with a whip. So the apostles had their priorities in order. They obeyed God and got beaten for it. This was the second beating for Peter and John in a short time. It doesn't seem fair, and it was not fair. When we try to have the right priorities, when we seek to put God first, we will see fruit. But we will also encounter thorns. Here the apostles ran into a briar patch as a result of their obedience to Christ's command to be witnesses.

In our society we are fortunate to have considerable freedom to be witnesses for Christ. Our problem is that often we don't take advantage of that freedom. I should be a bolder witness. But when we do speak out, we will encounter thorns. It may be thorns of criticism, social rejection, or discrimination of various sorts for our religious beliefs. We will also encounter thorns when we try to put God first in other areas of our lives. If we refuse to cheat, we may get a lower grade than others who do. If we determine to be honest in our business practices, we may take flack from fellow employees. If we decide to be totally honest in our sales job, we may lose commissions. If we refuse to work 60 or 70 hours a week, we may be passed over at promotion time.

Yet God also sustains us when we are cut and scratched by thorns. He brings along angels who open prison doors. He uses even unbelievers to save us from difficult predicaments. He brings along new jobs. He gives us families who love us for our right priorities. He gives us Christian friends when our old friends reject us.

We Christians are involved in a spiritual war. So we should expect thorns when we try to get our priorities in order, when we seek to obey God and not man. In the midst of the Revolutionary War in 1776 Thomas Paine (PROJECTOR ON--- THOMAS PAINE) wrote words that have application to us. His focus was on a physical and political war. But we can apply His words to our spiritual conflicts. He wrote in 'The American Crisis,' **"These are the times that try men's souls: the summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like Hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly. Tis dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to set a proper price upon its goods..."**

III.

There is another factor that we need to consider in our effort to have a proper perspective on priorities. Verses 41 & 42 teach us about THE STRENGTHENED ROOTS FROM PROPER PRIORITIES. (III. THE STRENGTHENED ROOTS...) Luke writes, **"Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus."**

Thorns didn't keep these guys from their appointed task. In fact they rejoiced to suffer shame for the sake of Jesus. Peter (1 PETER 4:12) later wrote in his first epistle, **"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. (1 PETER 4:13) But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."**

James described the effect that this endurance of thorns can and should have on us. (JAMES 1:2-3) He said in the first chapter of his letter, **"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. (JAMES 1:4) And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."**

There is a cost to proper priorities--- whether it is time spent with family, work done at church, honesty in figuring our expense accounts, or witnessing for Christ. But there is also a payoff. We can look forward not only to fruit in the lives of others but also to deepened roots in our own lives. Sticking tenaciously to proper priorities in the midst of thorns deepens our character.

British editor and Christian writer Malcom Muggeridge (MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE) once said, **"Indeed, everything I have learned, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness. If it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly**

existence, the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable.”

If the apostles of Jesus could endure beatings and death to bring the gospel to the rest of the world, if our Lord Jesus Christ could suffer death so that we might go to heaven some day; is it too much to expect that in our relatively free country we check ourselves to make sure that our priorities line up with God’s Word? Is it too much to expect that we concern ourselves with obeying God rather than man?

We can expect to be scratched and cut up by thorns when we choose to follow Christ. But we can also expect to see fruit from our proper priorities. We will also realize a deepened character that comes from the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as we persevere in the face of thorns. As the Apostle Peter wrote, “**...at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation.**”