



The Bible Corner

Cindy Cottone

Gamaliel's Choice

Gamaliel shuddered as he descended the old stone steps toward the prison cell. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court, and was not accustomed to such places. But Gamaliel was not without purpose. He intended to speak to the two men who had just been arrested. It wasn't really fair. These two men, Peter and John, were followers of Jesus and had been taken into custody for performing a miracle in His name.

There was no denying that a miracle had occurred. Everyone in the temple area had seen it happen. A beggar who had been crippled for 40 years had been healed by the two men. Gamaliel had even questioned this beggar himself.

"And how do you explain your sudden ability to walk?" Gamaliel had asked.

"Jesus has healed me and made me whole!" the beggar had cried. "Jesus has given me a new life!"

"Jesus was crucified. He's dead," Gamaliel had said firmly.

But the beggar had continued to insist, and the crowd had become even more excited. "His two apostles healed me in His name. It is through the power of Jesus that I walk." The beggar had run off after Peter and John, and left Gamaliel staring after him, still not convinced.

Jerusalem was a strange place in which to live during that period. The people of Israel had been waiting for a Messiah for thousands of years. But every time someone came on the scene and claimed to be the Messiah, he was never welcome. Some of the Jews had grown almost comfortable living in a land that was subject to Roman rule. As long as the Jews paid their taxes to these foreigners,

the Roman authorities permitted the Jews to worship in the temple.

Perhaps the Jews had become too comfortable with these Romans. It was the Sanhedrin that had brought the problem of Jesus to the attention of the Roman governor in the first place. Jesus had been crucified, but the problem didn't seem to be solved yet. Now His followers went around preaching about Him and using His name to perform miracles. Every day in Jerusalem, it seemed as though these apostles attracted more followers, much to the displeasure of the Sanhedrin.

A musty, rotten smell hung in the air deep within the prison, and Gamaliel let out a small cry as a rat slithered past. "What a miserable, dreary place," he thought: "I wonder if I would still hang onto my beliefs if it meant that I would have to stay here."

Gamaliel was somewhat surprised by the appearance of the two prisoners. Even in their dismal surroundings, they seemed calm and secure. They looked up now as Gamaliel approached.

"You were ordered by the Sanhedrin to stop preaching about Jesus, but still you went on, anyway," Gamaliel said, by way of introduction. "Why do you continue to break Jewish law?"

Peter spoke first. "We preach because we must," he replied. "Are we to obey men first or God?"

"Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah," John continued. "Why do you refuse to believe?" I see from your manner of dress that you are a Pharisee, someone who should know our scriptures well. All of the scriptures foretold that Jesus would

come to save us. Now He has risen from the dead even after the Sanhedrin had Him crucified like a common criminal."

"You are making dangerous statements now," said Gamaliel angrily. "The other members of the Sanhedrin are not as open-minded as I have been known to be. But you try even my patience."

This time Peter answered Gamaliel's charges. "It is clear that you don't believe in Jesus," he said. "All of your fancy studying of scriptures has done nothing to show you the truth. But we do believe in Jesus. We must be witnesses to the truth, and we will tell people everywhere about Him."

"Even if it means dying?" asked Gamaliel.

"Yes," they both answered without a moment's hesitation. "We are prepared to die for our beliefs," Peter added.

Gamaliel turned to leave. "Tomorrow, the Sanhedrin will decide your case. You both might just have to die," he threatened.

Early the next morning, the Jewish court was called to order. "Bring in the two prisoners," the chief priest commanded.

"Sir, I am afraid something very strange has happened," said the captain of the temple police. "When my officers went to the jail this morning, the doors were all locked and bolted, and the guards were standing there on duty. But when we went inside to take the two prisoners, they were gone."

"Well, where have they gone? Have they vanished into thin air?" asked the chief priest. "It's my guess that some of their followers have bribed the guards to release them."

"Someone has just reported that the two men are in the temple now, preaching to the people," the captain replied.

"Bring the prisoners here at once," the chief priest ordered.

Gamaliel stroked his beard thoughtfully. What was it about these two men that they were willing to risk everything for Jesus?

The police captain brought in Peter and John. "How is it that you managed to escape through prison walls?" the chief

priest demanded. "Tell us which guard set you free. He must be punished."

"The guards have done nothing wrong," John answered. "During the night, an angel of the Lord opened the gates."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?" retorted the chief priest. "Why do you break Jewish law by teaching about Jesus?"

"Because Jesus lives, and He is the only way to salvation," Peter replied.

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious, and decided to have Peter and John killed. But Gamaliel stood up and asked that the apostles be sent out of the room.

"Don't be so hasty in your ruling against these two men," Gamaliel said.

"Jerusalem has a long history of religious fanatics, and their preaching has attracted many followers. But after a time, their preaching came to nothing, and their followers scattered. So my advice is to leave these two men alone. If what they preach is false, their words will scatter by the roadside. But if they do represent God, then no one will be able to stop them. We will be fighting a battle with God Himself."

The Sanhedrin decided to follow Gamaliel's advice, but they still had Peter and John beaten as punishment. Peter and John were not afraid, but considered themselves fortunate to suffer for Jesus. When they were released, they began preaching again about everything that Jesus had taught them.

Gamaliel continued to study the scriptures and Jewish law, and many people considered him to be an expert in such matters. But Gamaliel chose never to believe in Jesus.

For discussion:

1) Peter and John had so much faith in Jesus that they were willing to die. How strong is your faith in Jesus?

2) The apostles told the Sanhedrin that an angel of the Lord had released them from prison. Do you remember a time in your own life when things seemed hopeless, and someone helped with one of your problems?

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