

Prayers

Opening prayer

Today is a day of blessing, Lord Jesus; open my eyes so that I may appreciate everything You are doing for me, and open my heart so that I may feel the strong and gentle touch of Your presence. Do a new work within me this day, I pray, so that my life may be fruitful for Your Kingdom and also be a blessing to others. May all I have received from You flow through me to others, to Your praise and glory: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: FARMING

1. For yourself

Today, some people do not eat meat because of the way animals are treated, and others avoid certain food because of slave labour in the fields in which it is grown, or corruption in its distribution. Pray about these things and any concerns you may have about what you eat

2. For your friends and family

Pray for those you love and pray especially about any attitudes or phobias concerning the eating of food

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the church's work amongst farming communities, which today, can be very sparse and very isolated

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

Pray about the dreadful use of child slave labour in West African countries, where Chocolate is grown. Ask the Lord how best this can be dealt with politically and socially.

Meditation

Jesus, You are there:

Dissatisfy my soul with mortal and material things,
and excite me by the potential of Your presence.

Jesus, stay close at hand:

Within this day, break through my mundane triviality,
and bring me Your delightful joy and happiness.

Jesus, keep nearby:

So whilst I travel, enhance my safety, secure my life,
and consecrate my journey by Your company.

Jesus, walk with me:

Then as we speak, lift me up in raptures of the Spirit,
and plunge me into higher truths of greater glory.

Jesus, never leave me:

Melt my stony but damaged heart by love's simplicity,
and assure my flagging spirit of Your eternal care.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 5:12-21

¹² At the hands of the apostles, many signs and wonders were done among the people, and by general agreement, all the believers used to gather in Solomon's Colonnade. ¹³ No one else dared associate with them, even though the people held them in high regard, ¹⁴ but more and more were becoming believers in the Lord, a multitude of men and women. ¹⁵ Because of this, the sick were brought out onto the streets and placed on beds and mats so that when Peter appeared, his shadow, at least, might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ Large numbers of people began to gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.

¹⁷ Then the high priest appeared, together with all who were with him (who were of the party of Sadducees), for they were filled with jealousy, ¹⁸ and they arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night, an angel of the Lord opened the jail doors and brought them out, and said,

²⁰ 'Go, stand in the temple courts, and tell the people the whole message about this life.'

²¹ On hearing this, they went into the temple courts at daybreak, and continued their teaching of the people.

Review

After the awesome events surrounding the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, we can well imagine that the young community of believers was somewhat shaken, but Luke goes out of his way to say that it was 'business as usual' for the apostles.

In this passage, Luke uses every available means to report that the early church was not set back by the betrayal of the community by Ananias and Sapphira. Even though the heart of the community had been taxed to the limit, there was no stopping the Gospel, and the church forged ahead without hesitation. The apostles had faced the Sanhedrin (4:5f.), and they had been forced to exercise the church's discipline (5:1-11), but the Gospel was not dependent on such things. The power of God was at work to establish the church, and Luke saw this and reported it. The time was coming when the church would face even tougher problems, but the story line of Acts is that nothing could stop the Holy Spirit guiding people in the work of the Gospel, whatever the circumstances. God was in charge.

So we read that the apostles took up their teaching place yet again in the Temple's outer courtyard, in 'Solomon's Colonnade' (5:12). This was where Peter and John first spoke to the crowds after healing the lame man (3:11). It may also have been the place where the disciples spoke in tongues after the Holy Spirit fell on them (2:14f.). This location within the outer Temple courtyards was accessible to Gentiles as well as women, it gave the apostles the maximum audience for their preaching, and it became the place where the early church met as a matter of course (5:12).

The thing that drew the crowds however, was not primarily the preaching, but the ministry of healing (5:12); Luke says that *'many signs and wonders were done amongst the people'* (5:12). This happened in fulfilment of Jesus' command that the disciples continue His work (Mark 16:15-20), but Luke's report also tells us that the church did not stop its work because of a problem (5:1-11), it carried on. 'Signs and wonders' were important, and they took place in the church at first after Pentecost (2:43); and then Peter spoke about 'signs and wonders', when encouraging the believers in his first sermon to them (4:30). So now, Luke reports that crowds were coming onto Jerusalem's streets to benefit from these miracles of God. Memorably, he tells us that healing was to be found in even a touch of Peter's shadow, such was the power that flowed from the apostles (5:15).

If we are to understand Luke's report fully, we must now read verses 13 and 14 together. He says that due to the apostles' high standing, *'no one else dared associate with them'* (5:13), but this sounds odd, because in the next verse, he says that the community was being overrun with new believers (5:14)! This is in truth a fascinating observation, because Luke perceives that the real truth here is indeed paradoxical. On the one hand, the apostles had been placed on a pedestal by people who did not understand what was happening, and people kept their distance (5:13). But on the other hand, the power of the Gospel meant that people did not hold back from the call to believe (5:14), even a *'multitude of men and women'*. Now after Pentecost, three thousand were saved (2:41) and the Lord added to this number daily (2:47), a few days later, Luke reports that, *'the believers numbered around five thousand'* (4:4). But here in this passage, the number goes beyond computing. The church was born by the Holy Spirit, in growth.

The Temple authorities, however, took note of what was going on. They had arrested Peter and John once and told them not to preach (4:13-22), and now they were flouting the authority of the Sanhedrin and holding

the High Priest up to ridicule. It comes as no surprise therefore to read that the apostles were arrested (5:18). At this point, we should note that Luke is no longer speaking about Peter and John specifically; he speaks about the apostles as a group. So although Peter and John were the focus of the High Priest's ire, this time, all the apostles were clapped in jail (5:18). Luke puts it down to religious jealousy. They knew what Peter and John had been preaching and they had already rejected the Gospel out of hand (4:13-22); they were furious that large crowds were gathering not just in the streets, but in the Temple, albeit the outer courtyard!

The story of the apostle's escape from jail is one of the briefest of such escapes in the Bible! If we are not focussing well on reading, then we could miss it! Luke has them in jail in one verse (5:18), and set free by an angel the next (5:19)! The highlight of our passage is surely the words of the angel who told the apostles to return to the place where they had been arrested and carry on telling *'the people the whole message about this life'* (5:20).

The way that the angel puts this is itself refreshing. The Gospel offers people a radical new 'life' which needs to be taught and explained, and God wants this work done without break. The High Priest and the Sadducees were not to stand in the way. We should be encouraged by this, and ensure that we do not let anything stand in the way of the Word of God.

Going Deeper

- Note on the translation of the passage
- The ministry of healing
- Sadducees
- The significance of the phrase 'being filled with ...' in the book of Acts

Note on the translation of the passage

V12 'At the hands of the apostles, many signs ... were done'

Other translations:

'the apostles worked many signs' (NIV)

'Now many signs and wonders were done' (NRSV)

My translation follows the Greek text very closely here, but other modern translations tend to dispense with the phrase 'at the hands of'. The phrase is an ancient one with the colloquial meaning of 'with the power'; but I am of the opinion that when used correctly, the phrase makes perfect sense in English. Most colloquial expressions do not translate well into English, but this one does.

V13 'No one else dared associate with them in public'

Other translations:

'No one else dared join them' (NIV)

'None of the rest dare to join them' (NRSV)

This is a difficult sentence to translate, firstly because the word for 'join', which I have translated 'associate ... in public', is not common, and secondly because at first reading the sentence seems odd considering what comes next, where Luke says in verse 14 that great numbers of people became believers. I have translated the Greek word used here 'associate ... in public', instead of 'join', because the Greek original has the sense of 'being attached' to something rather than joining. My translation controversially adds the phrase 'in public', but I believe that this is what is assumed by the sentence, and we must add this in order for the whole sentence of verses 13 and 14 to make sense.

V14 'but more and more were becoming believers in the Lord, a multitude of men and women'

Other translations:

'more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number' (NIV)

'more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of men and women' (NRSV)

This is another difficult verse to translate, and this is reflected in the differences between the Bible versions. The Greek reads literally, 'but even more believers in the Lord were proceeding, a multitude of men and women'. At the heart of each translation is the position and use of the awkward verb 'were proceeding'. Most Bible versions assume that this refers to the increase in

numbers, pure and simple. However, I believe that it speaks of an increasing intent amongst people to become believers. However this verse is translated, it is easy to understand what it means; large numbers of people were becoming believers.

V17 'Then the High Priest appeared ...'

Other translations:

'Then the High Priest and all his associates ... were filled with jealousy' (NIV)

'The the High Priest took action ... being filled with jealousy' (NRSV)

The Greek text says this, 'the High Priest arose, and all who were with him ...'. Most Bible versions try and interpret what this might mean, and the NIV misses out the verb altogether! The Greek word for 'arose', can also mean that he 'made an appearance', and so I have translated 'the High Priest appeared ...', which I believe is the most helpful translation.

V20 'and tell the people the whole message about this life'

Other translations:

'and tell the people the full message of this new life' (NIV)

'and speak to the people all the words of this life' (NRSV)

We might expect the angel to ask the apostles to preach the Good News, so the phrase they use 'all the words of this life' (literally) sounds odd. This is the reason why so many translations struggle with the sentence. I have used what seems to me to be the simplest way of translating the Greek words in a way that is consistent with other Bible texts.

The ministry of Healing

In the book of Acts, Luke keeps the story line turning over so that we cannot help being carried along with the flow of God's Holy Spirit and the work of the Gospel. More than that, Luke tells us a great many stories about the way that the Gospel affected people and changed their lives. Of course, the prime example of this is Luke's great description of Paul's conversion, a story that is told once (in Acts 9), then repeated as Paul makes his defence to the Sanhedrin later on towards the end of his ministry (in Acts 22), and for the third time as he testifies before King Agrippa (in Acts 26).

But more than this, Luke repeatedly tells us that as a consequence of the action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believers, people were healed and their lives were changed. This is why the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was so awful, for although they presented themselves as radically changed people, they were not. By holding themselves and their contribution back, they compromised the work of the Holy Spirit and their sin would have acted like a cancer at the heart of the community. Throughout, the church was built on the utter selflessness of the believers whose ministry, especially that of healing, changed the lives of countless people in the first century AD.

Luke is keen to connect this ministry of healing with the work of Jesus in his Gospels, and his description of it reads very much like the reports found in his Gospel of Jesus' ministry. For example, early on in the Gospel, he reports this;

They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. (Luke 6:18)

This report is echoed again in Luke 8:36 and 9:11f., and in all these instances, he informs us that when Jesus healed people it had a powerful impact on both on the individuals concerned and on local communities. This ministry was begun by Jesus and was demonstrably continued by the first disciples, so we should be able to agree that such a ministry should be a part and parcel of what God's people do today, albeit in very different social circumstances.

Sadducees

The Sadducees were a diminishing force in the life of Judaism, and we see a hint of this here in verse 17. The Sadducees were first and foremost an aristocratic and conservative group within Judaism, strongly committed to the maintenance of the status quo and the spiritual headship of the High Priest, but their authority had been steadily eroded by the Roman authorities, who kept an iron hand on the organisation of daily life in Judea. The Sadducees also had to contend with the fact that Judea and other Jewish regions came under the authority of the Herodian kings, in Jesus' day, sons of King Herod the Great. Their spiritual authority was absolute, but being a spiritual authority it was largely confined to ordering the affairs of the Temple.

Those who might have called themselves Sadducees were greater in number in the century before Christ, but now they were decreasing, and Luke reveals this specifically with an aside written in verse 17. After saying that the High Priest had appeared, he adds 'together with all who were with him, who were of the party of Sadducees'. It is not easy to convey this, but the Greek sentence strongly suggests that this was a small number of people, and they were all attached personally to the family of the High Priest. Although they were a small group, they held authority in the Temple, however, and so were responsible for dealing with Peter and John and the early church.

It would not be more than a few decades before Rome would come and raze Jerusalem to the ground, and with the loss of the Temple, the High Priest together with the party of Sadducees were lost forever within Judaism. From that time on, the governance of Judaism fell more into the hands of the party of Pharisees. Now we have learned a great deal about them in the Gospels, and we will learn more in Acts. We find out, for example, that the apostle Paul was a Pharisee before he was converted. The Pharisees developed their power throughout Judaism in the many cities of the Roman world, so we should not be surprised to discover that they are the main opposition to the church. They opposed Jesus in life and fought His church after His death.

The significance of the phrase 'being filled with ...' in the book of Acts

Luke speaks quite dramatically of being 'filled' with the Holy Spirit at the beginning of Acts. This quote jumps between the different uses of this phrase in the opening chapters of Acts:

*'there came from heaven a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, and it **filled** the entire house ... all of them were **filled** with the Holy Spirit ... (2:2,4) ... others sneered saying 'they are **filled** with new wine ... (2:13) ... then Peter, **filled** with the Holy Spirit ... (4:8) ... and they were all **filled** with the Holy Spirit ... (4:31)*

It is very interesting therefore for us to read in story of Ananias and Sapphira that Peter says to them 'why has Satan **filled** your heart ...' (5:3), and here in our passage today he says of the Sadducees, that they were '**filled** with jealousy' (5:17).

When looked at as a whole, the expressions seems to suggest that Luke's understanding of the human nature is that it is open in its natural state to be filled with any number of things, from the forces of evil (Satan) to human feelings and sentiments (jealousy). Thus, each individual has a tendency to behave according to such dominant features that have been accepted by the person concerned. Once evil is accepted then Satan has sway in the human soul to produce sin, and once emotionally trapped by some circumstances, the human soul can become dominated by an emotional fault, such as jealousy, or any number of negative emotional traits.

However, the soul that is saved is one that has been filled with God's Spirit, and whatever else happens to that person, this filling is something that dominates everything. Once the Holy Spirit is accepted within, He changes everything for the better, because the Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus Christ within, the promise of God that inspires and motivates the human soul. This is Luke's clear understanding throughout his Gospel and Acts.

Discipleship

Application

The significance of the healing ministry

This passage of Scripture indicates to us that the healing ministry is fundamental to the work of sharing the good news. Time and time again, people came to Jesus or to the apostles because they had a need, and it was met. Then, in their response to the need, either Jesus or the apostles have led people to face their eternal needs, and in particular their need of God's grace. Today, many people come to the church with deep needs, but these are not met and people either become wounded Christians or become disillusioned with the church. Those who minister the Word of God should face their obligation to address the needs of those to whom they preach.

In writing this I know how hard it is in practice to meet the needs of people, but we cannot escape the fact that the church is built on the lives of people whose lives have been changed by grace, perhaps healed. We are to be agents of change and should be proud of it. I believe the days are coming when it will no longer be acceptable for preachers to stand and preach, and simply walk away at the end of a sermon, as if all has been done simply through speaking. The church will again see preaching as an agent of radical change in the hearts of those who come to listen, and preachers will expect to see people change before their eyes.

But this will only come when the Holy Spirit comes freshly on His servants, and they accept His empowering for the Kingdom work of preaching, which includes the ministry of healing.

Questions for groups

1. What does this passage of Scripture teach us about the healing ministry and its significance for the Gospel? How can we put this into effect today?
2. Should we expect opposition to the message we preach, and if so, from where will this come?
3. If Peter and John and the apostles went to teach daily in Solomon's Portico in the Temple, where should we preach the Gospel today?

Discipleship challenges

- *This passage tells us about what the apostles faced in order to preach the Gospel and to do God's will. Ask yourself what God requires you to face in order to do His will, and what kind of sacrifice this requires of you. Search out the answers to this.*
- *Make a comparison between the church today and the church reflected in today's passage. Do this by listing some of the attributes and characteristics of each and assessing whether they are positive or negative*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we thank You for the great gifts you have given us for the work of Your Kingdom. Help us to be willing to use our gifts for their intended purpose, and make us ready to do Your will. May we not be found to be idle, but amongst those who are always ready to shoulder the work that is before us. Thank you, Lord Jesus, AMEN
