

Followers of the Way

Reaching out to 'the Godless'

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Acts 2:32-47

How extraordinary, when you think about it. God had sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to go head-to-head with Satan and break the devil's hold – in the only way that was actually possible, without destroying our humanity – and then He entrusted the foundation of the Church to what was in effect a bunch of ignorant peasants. Fishermen from Galilee, a tax collector ... 'sinners'. Had most of these guys even gone to school, let alone university?

Actually, they would all have had instruction in Mosaic history and the Torah within the family and local community, but, that apart, the apostles were not part of the intellectual cream of the day. Though, that said, Paul definitely was. He was a Pharisee, by his own testimony educated 'at the feet of Gamaliel' (Acts 22:3), one of the most eminent and noted scholars of the time in Jewish oral law, and almost certainly holding a leading position in the Sanhedrin. So Paul, or Saul as he then was, didn't just go to 'university', he was a product of the Oxbridge of his day! No wonder God chose *him* to carry the message of salvation to the Gentiles.

But the disciples who had companied with Jesus from the start, by and large weren't like this. Relatively speaking, apart from the teaching they received from Jesus, their education would have been minimal. In the grand scheme of things, they wouldn't have rated! Yet it was to these men – these fearful, weak *peasants*, occupying the lowest position in society – that Jesus entrusted the task of establishing the Church.

Do you ever feel unimportant, and that you can't make a difference? Well, take heart, because it was these 'nobodies' that God chose – and look at what they achieved! In our sermon series over the next few weeks, we're going to look at how the apostles went about fulfilling their commission, the challenges they faced, the persecution they encountered ... and their success. Because in these dark times, when evil seems to have grown so powerful, the lessons to be learned from their example are perhaps more relevant than they've ever been. The apostles – and indeed all the disciples – had a mountain to climb, as do we, but, against all odds, with God's guidance and help, they managed it. And so can we.

So, bearing in mind that their leader had just been crucified, how did they start? Well, first off, Jesus had told them to remain in Jerusalem until they were clothed with power from on high **Luke 24:44 -49**. These men – and women, let it be said – knew, beyond all doubt, that their commission was to go out and tell the world the good news, but Jesus was very specific. Don't do anything, He said, till you have

God's power. In other words, this was God's initiative and His battle, so when His followers went in God's strength and at His command, they'd accomplish the task that was before them. But if they tried to go it alone ... not a hope!

First off, then, the disciples had to be obedient and wait for the anointing. They had to have God-ordained direction. And, just as Jesus had said it would, that came.

Lesson 1, when we earnestly want to follow God, He always responds. But we're each one of us different. Each one of us has our own unique calling, and God provides and equips us for *that* calling. He gives us power – but we have to be obedient and stay within our calling, otherwise, God's purpose for us (and His wider plan) won't be fulfilled. As a start then, it's important that we trust, we listen, and that we obey.

Lesson 2, when Peter and the disciples got clothed with power that first Pentecost morning, how did they make a start, what did they do? Well we know that they were bowled over and began to declare the wonders of God, v.11 '... we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues.'. Good start, but something more was clearly needed, and it wasn't long before Peter stepped into the breach. He told the crowds that what they were seeing was the fulfilment of prophecy given long ago through Joel '... in the last days, I will pour out my spirit on all people'. But then he goes on to tell them about Jesus, His ministry and death, and the wonder of His resurrection. This was the incarnate Son of God, Peter says, the Lord and Messiah; whom you crucified.

Now the crowd already knows something momentous is going on, because of what they can see. So they listen ... and they're appalled. What can we do, they ask? And Peter's response is instantaneous. He doesn't mince his words, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation,' he says, 'repent and be baptised *in the name of Jesus*.'

Let's note, there's no shilly-shallying round for fear of causing offence, no diplomatic adjustment of language – Peter gives it to them straight. You're not just sinners, you're murderers! But it was for you that Christ came and that He died. Against all reason, He still wants to help, and if you only repent, you too will be saved and receive this amazing gift of the Spirit!

I don't know about you – but that would get my attention. However, over the centuries, the Church universal has lost its bite and become very good at not upsetting people. As result, it's built up huge wealth and a powerbase that spans the globe. But it's become a lapdog to worldly power and, because of that, it's lost God's power. If we want to reach the Godless and lost today – and that's still our commission, of course – then we have once again to become clothed with power from on high and regain our God-given and inspired voice. We have to have the courage to choose who we will serve.

As those first disciples knew only too well, there can be no compromise with sin. Instead, we have to proclaim the truth, standing on Jesus, and Jesus alone. This is both the starting point and challenge. The Established Church is crumbling before the hostile values of a secular world, and the authentically Christian voice is being deliberately suppressed by those intent on crushing all opposition and dissent.

The truth is, we are facing a hostile belief system – a religion that overtly worships and glorifies Satan – and we must regain our voice.

The light shines in darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. Isaiah 40:3 “A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord...”. That’s our call today, as it was the call of the apostles. Anointed and empowered by God, this is a battle that we can and must win – but to do that we have first to be faithful and cast out sin from our own lives, and then we have to go at His command. The battle belongs to the Lord ... in His name we will conquer.