

Baptist hour messages



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REMEMBER GAMALIEL!

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(Scripture: Acts 5:33-42)

What a predicament to be found in a situation where one is fighting against God! Yet that is exactly the case when men resist the works of God. A warning against that type of thing came from Gamaliel, a first century doctor of the law before whom some early Christians were brought. These nameless, humble, bold folks were willing to risk their public standing in order to make known the message about their Galilean Savior. One of their number, Peter, had been arrested and imprisoned. Then, quite a stir resulted. When the tempest would not subside, they consulted Gamaliel, that respected interpreter of the law.

IF THE WORK OF MEN

Hear his words: "... if this work be of men, it will come to nought: but if it be

of God, you cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God." (Acts 5:38-39).

Friends, that sounds like noble advice, doesn't it? But let's take a second look at it and the man who gave it. There he sits in the stolid detachment so characteristic of his office. Few men were revered above his kind, and this particular one held the admiration of multitudes. From his seat of authority he related to them how another rabble rouser had come to town sometime previously named Theudas, and a number of people had followed him, only to come to nought.

Then a certain Judas of Galilee claimed to have been some sort of Messiah and got a big following. He, too, resulted in nothing of any consequence. Then in effect Gamaliel said, "Now, don't you know this Jesus is just another such impostor? Give Him time, and He will come to nothing. Any such ridiculous claims as He made, any such fantastic predictions represent the ravellings of a disillusioned dreamer. Just give Him time, and He will be no issue." My, how wrong can a person be, especially one who poses as a doctor of the law? Come to nothing? Other men have said the same thing. Voltaire predicted in his day that he would live to see the death of the church.

When they burned William Tyndale for translating the Bible into English so the common man could read the Word of God, many said that they were burning the heretic in whose ashes would also be buried that ridiculous interpretation of religious freedom. But from those very ashes there arose a vapor that smelled of

Baptist Hour Sermon Topics for March

- March 2—Vulgar Religion
- March 9—"To Be Or Not to Be."
- March 16—Quicksand
- March 23—Is Life Worth Living . . . Really?
- March 30—Antiques

Hear Them on THE BAPTIST
HOUR

Read Them in THE BEAM

fresh release, of pungent balm to set other spirits free. No, Gamaliel, it didn't come to nought.

A CONCESSION

Yet, we must be fair with this instructor of orthodoxy; to his credit must go a word of commendation. He did say, ". . . if it be of God, you cannot overthrow it." That, at least, is some concession. "There is a minute, yet improbable chance that God might be working through all this heat and passion, and if so, then you would not want to be found in the embarrassing impasse of fighting against God." But this statement isn't quite as laden with charitable wisdom as it first seems. Actually, it was the voice of prudence, that virtue that would keep a man from being swept off his feet by every puff of variation in reports.

One who keeps his footing amidst a slippery religion is to be commended indeed. Nothing so curses the Kingdom of God as a type of gullibility which takes hearsay, old fables, and half-truths as being divinely inspired. The ability to be detached from such is virtue indeed. The hotheads, the rabble who would string a man up under the throes of blind passion are seldom, if ever, good candidates for the cause of Christ. Sometimes a refusal to take sides is the wisest course. Sweetness and light have their place in a system of values—but it was right at this point that Gamaliel missed his golden opportunity. His best virtue became his worst vice.

Looking at this life-changing movement of Christianity with a judicious eye, weighing the pros and cons about it all, then taking a "what does it matter?" attitude toward it all is, I contend to you, the saddest plight of human nature. Why, anyone can go that far with it. Pilate did! Sweetness and light mean nothing if the world is being made over, and one is being left out of the process. Who cares about all the discretionary speech, the diplomatic palaver, if in its employment, one is being passed by when the main drama is acted out? Yet, that is exactly what happened to Gamaliel.

DETACHED INDIFFERENCE

What was his sin? It was the sin of regarding the great movements of life with

detached indifference, the sin of taking the easy way out when mighty issues are at stake, the sin that looks on human suffering with a blase immunity because it isn't happening to the one who is looking.

Maybe part of the reason was his approach to old age. It is not inevitable, but it seems that when one comes to the last third of his life, he, like Gamaliel, looks at the great movements of life, the things that require enthusiasm and passionate zeal with the old cautious tediousness that bogs down the movements from lack of momentum. Great issues of life, like great machines, often die from lack of fuel and fire. Yes, the worst thing this early doctor of the law could have done is what he did; namely, he said, "Wait and see. Do not get worked up. Let the zeal subside. Don't capitalize on ascending speed. Give it a chance to die down, then we will sit in judgment in a type of autopsy attitude."

Few of these early Christians were surprised that the gates of the jail fell off when they went to their knees in prayer. Few—because they knew that the prisoner within had enough heat and warmth in his heart, that it (like an acetylene torch) would melt the hinges off! What a contrast to the cold rigors of the law's exactitude! What, with its cold logic, its philosophical splitting of verbal hairs, it would have never caused the prison gates to collapse! No decrying of the law here—no, not at all—but an earnest effort to show that one's zeal for righteousness is far more qualifying a virtue for life than a library of codes and statutes.

It is right at this junction that the Church of Jesus Christ must sit up and take notice. Gamaliel lives today. He lives in all those who would regard this life-changing business of Christianity as a nice, respectable ethic to be coddled, guarded, and protected instead of something to be let loose, and demonstrated within. Gamaliel today casts a cursory glance over this type of sermon and dismiss it as another of the same old stuff. He prefers instead to wait awhile and see if he can't walk by sight instead.

BUT IF OF GOD

Then briefly note the other part of his statement, "But if it be of God . . ." Just to be on the safe side, there is an outside chance that God is somehow mov-

ing through all this confusing mystery. His legal training had accomplished this facet of his nature. "If it be of God . . ." That is, indeed, a wonderful pair of scales on which we should place all the movements that are under foot at this very moment. All that besets the human race can be weighed here.

If the march of the masses toward a better plateau of living is also the march of God, if the long, loud groans of the human spirit for freedom and security are at once and the same time the groans of God, if the disconcerted breaking up of old systems and loyalties is accompanied by the Almighty, then man is foolish to buck it. He cannot succeed in the process. Man is no match for his Maker!

Herein is a wonderful source to strengthen our faith. When God ordains that certain things should happen, they are going to happen—all the loud protests of men notwithstanding. This is what we call inevitable providence. Some have called it predestination, but call it what you like, there is a time and tide in the affairs of men which will swell by the sheer force of divine magnetism. God's endorsement to the note of life is all that is needed to assure its being negotiable.

IN DELILAH'S LAP

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The lap of Delilah is no place for a Nazarite. At least, it was not the place for Samson. That young man was born to Godly parents and had all the promise needed to turn out successfully. An angel had appeared to Manoah, Samson's father, and had announced the coming of a boy who would bless their lives. One would think that anyone whose birth was accompanied by angelic enunciation would be bound to succeed, yet the very opposite happened. I want to tell you about it.

His very name suggests strength—force and power. When his name is mentioned now (centuries later), it still suggests a formidable tower of ability. But the boy with the big biceps turned out wrong. Part of his trouble was sensual. Most of it, however, was the fact that he, like many of us, never learned how to fight successfully the battles within him. So long as he was called into battle from

LOSING FIGHT

To fight against the doings of God is just as sensible and consequential as some of the midget submarines that were employed by one nation against its enemies in a recent war. The tiny subs were made of cheap metal alloys, and the few that eventually made contact with the target did practically no damage. Just think of it—a little tin submarine attacking the steel bulk of a floating aircraft carrier. No more absurd, however, than a human being with his little fists doubled and his little tongue profanely protesting the work of God!

This band of humble Christians left from that hearing with Gamaliel, unmoved by his detachment and untamed by his indifference. Rather, they departed rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer in His name. Neither the whip, nor insulting ridicule silenced one mouth. Theirs was an infectious fever and an undying fervor, and to this day it burns with consuming brilliance.

May God give us that inner fire that would face today's Gamaliel undaunted, undismayed, and with daring certainty that this is the work of our God.

without, he did all right. But on the battleground of the human will, out on the firing line of passionate emotions, he was little more than a puny weakling.

THE WRONG ENVIRONMENT

The morals from this Old Testament lesson are many. A place to begin is with the honest conclusion that in the wrong environment one is most apt to weaken. A good man in a bad place is a questionable set of circumstances—if, for no other reason, a good man cannot always be sure of what his own reactions will be. It is not an afterthought that the Bible admonishes, "Let him who thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." Peter wasn't sure of his reaction under adverse conditions. In the wrong environment he weakened, drew in the lines of his faith, pinked in the blush of embarrassment occasioned by the question, "Aren't you one of them?"