

Seeing God As Our Highest Truth Source

by Kaely Miller

KEY VERSE:

But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

Acts 5:29

FAITH STORY:

Acts 5:17-42

FAITH FOCUS:

The high priest and the sect of Sadducees are jealous of the apostles, because crowds are gathering around them, bringing the sick and the tormented for the apostles to heal. They arrest them and put them in the public prison. During the night, an angel of the Lord appears and opens the prison doors. The apostles leave the prison and enter the Temple at daybreak, ready to proclaim the message of life that God has asked them to proclaim. When the high priest sends for them, the police find the prison securely locked with the guards, but missing the apostles. Someone arrives and explains to them that the apostles are back in the Temple, teaching, and the Temple police are sent to arrest them again. The apostles are forced to stand before the council, and are reminded that they were ordered not to teach in Jesus' name. Peter and the other apostles answer that they must obey God, because God raised up the Jesus everyone killed, and exalted him to his right hand as leader and Savior in order that Israel might receive forgiveness of their sins. The apostles claim to be witnesses.

After hearing this, the council is enraged, but a Pharisee called Gamaliel stands up and tells the council to consider carefully how they will punish the apostles. He recounts other leaders who died, and whose following died out, reasoning that if the followers of Jesus are rising up for their own accord, it will eventually fail, but if they are doing it because of God, then there's no way to overthrow them, and that would also be fighting against God. The council listens to him, and has the apostles flogged. The apostles are ordered not to preach in the name of Jesus, and they leave, rejoicing because they were considered worthy to be punished and dishonored for Jesus' sake. They didn't stop preaching or teaching.

SESSION GOAL:

To challenge the students to reflect on their current truth sources in their every day lives and to verbally commit to ways in which they can claim God as their highest truth source.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- articulate some of the cultural-historical background of the Acts 5 passage (i.e. who the high priest was, what the Sanhedrin was, how the political uprisings in Jesus' time were viewed)
- correlate the actions of the apostles with the actions of Jesus, and consequently recognize actions under God's will
- identify their truth sources as seen through their actions
- verbalize ways in which God can be seen as their ultimate truth source

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles
- 2 Whiteboard or chalkboard
- 3 Journals or paper
- 4 Writing utensils
- 5 Ply board or poster boards or sheets of paper (or a youth room wall)
- 6 Paint
- 7 Paintbrushes

SESSION PLAN:

FOCUS:

As the students are arriving, have the youth who are already present tell you one story from their week. After everyone has arrived, ask them to stand up in the middle of the room, then tell the following story:

Imagine that your English teacher has asked you to stay after class. She shows you the recent test you took, along with your friend's test. She says your answers are identical, which means one of you must have cheated. She tells you she knows that you are a good student, and she believes your friend cheated off of your test. She's willing to give you full credit—she just had to let you know that your friend cheated. Now, you know that YOU are the one who cheated, but you also know that your friend doesn't have the best reputation with the teachers, so it wouldn't really ruin their reputation anymore

to be caught cheating. You, on the other hand, have a lot at stake, because you are known as one of the best students in your class. Do you tell the teacher the truth and point out her mistake, or do you remain quiet, letting your friend fail the test?

Ask students to move to the left wall if they would 'fess up, and to the right wall if they would remain silent. Then ask them to explain their choice. After discussing the scenario, have everyone come back to the center of the room again and read the next scenario.

You are an athlete playing your favorite sport. Your coach has subtly given you an unfair advantage over the other members of your team. You realize this. What do you do? Do you confront your coach, possibly threatening your good position on your team, or do you just accept your good luck?

Ask students to move to the left wall if they would confront the coach, and to the right wall if they accept their good luck and stay quiet. Again, ask for explanations, then bring students back to the middle for the next story.

Your friend tells you that last night he asked his parents what they would do if they caught him doing drugs, and he was yelled at and told not to ask that question again. He's pretty upset about it. That same day, you plan on meeting him at his house after supper. You arrive at his house and see the lights on. Expecting him to be home, you knock and walk in, like you usually do. You hear some noise in the living room, and find his dad cleaning up what looks to be the remains of pot. He tries to cover up, but it's clear what he's been doing. He tells you not to tell anyone, especially not his son - your friend. Do you tell your friend when he arrives, or do you go along with the dad, pretending not to have seen anything?

Ask students to move to the left wall if they would tell their friend, and the right wall if they would pretend not to have seen anything. Discuss their responses.

CONNECT:

Ask them to reflect on the scenarios given above. Ask them some questions about their reasoning, like:

- What are some morals or ethics that you thought about in these scenarios?
- What affected your decision?

EXPLORE THE BIBLE:

Read Acts 5:17-42

Divide into three smaller groups and ask each group to find out how their person(s) responded to what was happening to them.

Group 1: The Apostles—how did they respond?

Instruct students to find six different responses that the apostles made.

FYI, they are:

- In response to being arrested, they voluntarily went to prison (they didn't fight back). (v.18)
- In response to the Lord, they did as he commanded them. (v.20-21)
- In response to the Temple police, they allowed themselves to be brought into the council once again, without fighting back. (v.26)
- In response to the high priest questioning them, they claimed God as their authority, standing up in courage. (v.29-32)
- In response to being flogged, they rejoiced. (v.40-42)
- In response to being ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus, they never stopped doing so. (v.42)

Group 2: The high priest and the council—how did they respond?

Instruct students to look for four responses.

FYI:

- In response to the apostles drawing huge crowds, they responded in jealousy and had them arrested. (v.17-18)
- In response to the apostles escaping prison and being seen in the Temple again, they had the apostles brought in and questioned. (v.26-27)
- In response to Peter and the apostles' answer of obeying God rather than authority, they were enraged and desired to kill them. (v.33-34)
- In response to Gamaliel, they were convinced and had the apostles flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus. (v.39-40)

Group 3: How did Gamaliel respond?

(This includes only one response.)

- In response to the apostles' answer of obeying God rather than authority, he asked the rest of the council to consider the previous uprisings, and that this one could be the will of God. (v.33-39)

Discuss the different responses. Use a chalkboard or whiteboard to record the answers.

Continue by digging into the cultural-historical aspect of this narrative.

- *Why were the apostles arrested in the first place?*

They were doing many signs and wonders. People held them in high esteem, and more and more people were becoming believers (both men and women, which is radical in itself). The sick were being healed and those tormented by unclean spirits were being cured.

- *Where else in the New Testament have you heard something similar to this?*

You can use any passage with Jesus doing many of the same things. Some of them are Matthew 4:23-25, Matthew 15:29-31, Mark 3:7-12, Luke 4:40-41, etc.

- *So the disciples are acting in much the same way Jesus acted when he was alive. And Jesus was killed because he was a political threat, so if the disciples are acting like him, they too then must be political threats.*
- *Who was the high priest? Who were the Sadducees and the Pharisees?*

The high priest served as the head of the Temple, which was like the head of the government for the Jewish people. He was the representative of the ruling power and he was responsible for the spiritual welfare of the people. Most high priests were aristocrats and bought their position with money. (In Jesus' day, the system was fairly corrupt, and the highest positions often went to those who were the wealthiest.) He held a lot of power and prestige.

The Sadducees and Pharisees were both Jewish leaders as well. The Pharisees were a group of social leaders who represented authority, but not nearly as much as the high priest. They were involved primarily as Rabbis, teaching the Jewish people the law, the Torah—which was God's commandments. They worked within the synagogue. The Sadducees were another group of social leaders, but functioned primarily among the wealthier families, rather than all of society. They were mainly priests and wealthy, powerful, community leaders who worked within the Temple.

All three of these groups composed the Sanhedrin, which is the council mentioned in the Acts passage—, the Jewish government body, in charge both politically and religiously of the Jewish people.

- *So why do you think the high priest and the rest of the Sanhedrin were so upset when Peter spoke about obeying only the authority of God?*

While there are obvious answers to this question, one of the main points here is the contrast between Peter (and the apostles) and the high priest (and the council).

- *Who was Peter? (refer to Matthew 4:18-22 if needed)*

Peter was a fisherman.

- *What status did fishermen have in Jesus' day?*

They were the lower class, the uneducated, the people no one would really give much attention to.

- *So, in light of who the high priest was, in all his power and prestige and wealth, why was it such a radical thing for Peter to speak to him like he did?*

Peter, a lower class "nothing" - a commoner, is reminding this man who is essentially in charge of the people's spirituality, that he should remain obedient to God and God alone. The high priest is meant to be the epitome of obeying God's will. Yet this is the same high priest who had the apostles arrested because they were caring for the people, something he should have been doing and wasn't. Therefore, the apostles were a threat to him and his power.

The apostles were also a threat to the high priest because their message and their teachings about Jesus were also a threat. The apostles were revealing the power of Jesus and his true nature through healing people. In the ancient worldview, people who had a sickness were believed to be ill because they had sinned. Therefore, they would have to go to the Temple in order to have their sins forgiven - in order to be healed. Yet only the "clean" people could go into the Temple, so the very people who needed to be healed couldn't, because they were ill, and therefore unclean. This is why Jesus healed outside of the Temple, and the apostles carried on this practice. So for healings and forgiveness to occur elsewhere was a major threat for those working within the Temple - the Sadducees and Pharisees. And clearly the high priest wasn't healing anyone, so he would also feel threatened.

- *What did Gamaliel mean when he said that if this plan is of God, the apostles couldn't be overthrown (v.35-39).*

In Jesus' days, there were a lot of political uprisings because of the cruelty and unfairness of the Roman government that was ultimately controlling the Jewish people. Theudas and Judas would have been leaders of these types of uprisings. Whenever a leader threatened the government in a political way, they were often killed as a form of capital punishment and social control. When they died, their uprising would either die out or would be transferred to some other leader. Therefore, if the apostles were still doing what Jesus did when he was alive, after he had been killed, then this must mean that their cause fell under God's will, or else it would soon die out. Yet we know it doesn't die out because verse 14 states that more and more were added to their number.

- *What was the highest truth source for each of these characters? Why did they respond like they did - what moral and ethics, what authority, were they following?*

Group 1: The apostles

—They were obeying God's will, as seen through Jesus.

—They were truly caring for the people, in a physical way.

Group 2: The high priest and the council

—He was obeying his own desires, seen through not taking care of the people in the first place and by him feeling threatened by the apostles (and consequently having them jailed and flogged

and forbidden to teach anymore). Yet, his own desires were “protected” and “justified” by falling under the guise of protecting the traditional religious practices (like having people healed and forgiven within the Temple).

Group 3: Gamaliel

—He was obeying both God and reason, since if the apostles’ cause was from God, it shouldn’t be opposed, and if it wasn’t, it would soon die out anyway and then they wouldn’t have to worry about it.

- *For the apostles, how did their highest truth source lead to their actions and their responses?*

Because of their obedience to God, and for their care and concern for the people as a whole, they didn’t mind participating in civil disobedience. They obeyed God because they believed him as the ultimate authority, but they still allowed themselves to be arrested and jailed and flogged (and rejoiced over it), since the government still had the right to do so. They acted nonviolently in order to follow God, and trusted in him to take care of the situation.

- *For the council and the high priest, how did their highest truth source form their responses?*

They were jealous of the apostles’ influence with the people, and they had them arrested and jailed and flogged as a result. They were so angry at the truth that Peter told them that they were ready to kill them, the very people who were acting under God’s will.

- *For Gamaliel, how did his highest truth source show through his response?*

He was able to save the apostles’ from an early death because of his ability to see God’s will at hand, and because of his logic. He helped further God’s will within the society.

APPLY:

If your students have youth group journals, hand them out now. If not, hand out pieces of paper, enough for each student to journal with.

Give them this prompt, and then allow them some time to journal:

What do I consider my highest truth source? In all honesty, do I consider God and God’s will my highest truth source, or is it something else? If God’s will is my highest truth source, how do I know what God’s will is? How do my actions and my responses to situations show my highest truth source?

Encourage honesty and reassure them that these journals will be kept private, and that they will be the only ones who will know what they’ve written.

RESPOND:

Have paint available and paint brushes. On a ply board, or numerous poster boards, or a large sheet of paper, (or even on the youth room wall), invite the students to write or illustrate how they could follow God as their highest truth source. If they are having trouble with this, help them remember the scenarios you started out with in the Focus section, or help them reflect on the Acts passage. This could be things like honesty, or civil disobedience, or standing up for those who are less well-off.

End in prayer for the students, especially in the upcoming weeks, for courage and strength to let God be their highest truth source.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE:

The real reason Jesus was crucified was for purely human, political reasons. He was a threat to both the Jewish and the Roman authorities, especially since he had a following. Therefore, the fact that the apostles were doing the same things that he did (taking care of the poor and the needy in a very real, physical way - which was, in effect, taking care of them spiritually), also posed them as threats to the Jewish authorities. This led to their arrest, their imprisonment, their flogging, and their being forbidden to teach with Jesus' ideas. They were nearly killed for this very reason.

The idea of disobedience also plays a large part in this narrative, especially for the Anabaptists. The apostles did not expect God to miraculously deliver them from punishment and pain (although he did release them from prison, to continue his will). Rather they disobeyed the government and the Jewish authority, knowing full well they would be punished. They accepted this punishment nonviolently and even rejoiced over this later. The goal was not to avoid the consequences of their actions, but rather to rely on God's sovereignty even in the midst of those consequences.

Also, this passage is not stating that every authority is corrupt or evil. Gamaliel showed that some authorities are good and are orderly, and that they can further God's will as well. The point is rather that you should be able to discern when you need to follow civil disobedience and when you don't, and to be prepared for the consequences of that decision.