



Chapter 10

Sharing the Gospel and Fear of Suffering

Acts 5:27–42

UNDERSTANDING

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DISCUSSION

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Acts 5:27-42

The Big Picture

God gives us suffering as an opportunity to strengthen our relationship with Him.

Learning to Suffer

For many committed Christians, there comes a point early on in their journey when they actively seek out suffering. They are excited about making sacrifices; they dream about being martyred for the faith. They think that any day now they will have stigmata!

But then suffering actually *does* come, and most Christians struggle. The obstacle might not be the one they imagined, or it might be unclear why God would allow it. Perhaps the obstacle proves much bigger and harder to carry than they wanted. Despite the initial desire to suffer, we become perplexed in the face of hardships and obstacles.

The first step in preparing ourselves for obstacles is to not be surprised by them. St. Peter writes in his first letter, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).

The second step is to work on the virtue of perseverance so that we can learn the habit of working through and overcoming obstacles in our life. One of the best ways to do this is to follow the example of the saints. The Acts of the Apostles offers several examples of persevering through many trials. In this last chapter, the hope is to look at the apostles one last time for inspiration to confront the obstacles your group will face as they attempt to evangelize.

Suffering in Action: St. Peter and the Apostles

In Acts, we see several examples of suffering, particularly in Acts 5:27-42. Earlier in chapter 5, the apostles' fame is spreading in Jerusalem and the surrounding towns. They are working signs and wonders, and many believers were being added. In response, the Jewish authorities arrest the apostles—but when they are called up for questioning, they are not to be found in their cells. Instead, they are back in the temple, teaching the people. With this context in mind, let's look at how the Jewish authorities question the apostles.

Application to Jesus

We can look to Jesus as we unite our sufferings to the foot of the cross

Obeying God Rather than Men (Acts 5:27-32)

Sometimes it is easy to forget that the apostles are real human beings. They have fears and doubts just like us. They have already been sent to prison before, and now they are being questioned about their actions. Their response is not only that they will “obey God rather than men” (5:29), but they then go on to preach the gospel in verses 30-33.

Predictions and Beatings (Acts 5:33-39)

Apparently, the gospel presentation given to the Jewish authorities doesn't go over too well; they are hoping to kill the apostles. The Pharisee Gamaliel (who also happens to be Paul's former teacher, before Paul converted to Christianity) stands up to offer his wisdom on the situation. Gamaliel tells the group that if the apostles are working against God, they will not succeed; but if they are working with God, no one will be able to overthrow them.

This is a great reminder for us to depend on God in our evangelization—especially amidst difficulties. Early on in the history of FOCUS, there were some significant difficulties. Curtis Martin, President and Founder of FOCUS, gathered in prayer with some of the first FOCUS missionaries and prayed that if FOCUS was not doing God's will that God would crush the work of FOCUS and not allow it to continue. In the end, we have to remember that God is the source of conversion.

Joy in Suffering (Acts 5:40-42)

It is one thing to be able to suffer for the sake of the gospel; it is another to suffer with joy. The apostles' reaction to being beaten as punishment was to leave "the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name."

This rejoicing helps us rethink our vision of suffering. Suffering, setbacks, and obstacles are often seen as failures in the secular world, but in the eyes of the saints, they are cause for rejoicing. It is, in fact, when our way is most difficult that we have a profound opportunity to deny ourselves and fully give our will over to God.

St. Therese of Lisieux once said, "My God, I choose all! I do not want to be a saint by halves, I'm not afraid to suffer for You, I fear only one thing: to keep my own will; so take it, for I choose all that You will!"

This is by no means an easy transition. It is only done through allowing God to change our hearts and minds during prayer and in actively working to build up this virtue in our daily lives.

Application to Our Lives

To be a Christian, means to carry our cross. Our goal is to accept suffering, persevere through it and eventually rejoice in it.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Acts 5:27–42

STEP 1: OPENER

Begin by passing out the “Evangelization and Fear” handout that accompanies this chapter. Have each member rank their fears, and have them share their number one fear with the group.

Split up your study into groups of four. Have each group take one of the fears and come up with reasons why this fear would be irrational. Give them several minutes to come up with a couple of solid arguments. Then have them come back and share with the group. (Note: It might be a good idea to ask your group to bring a notebook to this study or for you to bring some scratch paper for them.)

STEP 2: BACKDROP

In the Acts of the Apostles, we see several examples of suffering. One of the best examples is found in Acts 5:27-42. Previously in chapter 5, the apostles’ fame is spreading in Jerusalem and the surrounding towns. They are working signs and wonders, and many believers were being added. In response, the Jewish authorities arrest the apostles—but when they are called up for questioning, they are not to be found in their cells. Instead, they are back in the temple, teaching the people. With this context in mind, let’s look at how the Jewish authorities question the apostles.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Today's passage is Acts 5:27-42. Start by reading Acts 5:27-32.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

Exploration: Questions and Answers

1. In the face of questioning from the Jewish authorities, how do the apostles respond?

Answer: They don't back down. Instead, they go on to preach the gospel to the Jewish authorities.

2. It is easy to forget that these figures in Acts are humans just like us. They had feelings, fears, and doubts just like we do. If you were them, how would you have responded?

Allow the group to discuss.

Read Acts 5:33-42

3. What does Gamaliel say about the mission of the apostles?

Answer: Gamaliel tells the group that if the apostles are working against God, they will not succeed; but if they are working with God, no one will be able to overthrow them.

4. What do Gamaliel's words remind us about evangelization?

Answer: God is the source of conversion.

5. What do the Jewish authorities do to the apostles before they leave?

Answer: They are beaten and told not to preach the gospel.

6. What do the apostles do?

Answer: They rejoice and continue to preach that Jesus is the Messiah.

7. Why it is hard to rejoice in our suffering?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. St. Paul goes through a great deal of suffering as he preached the gospel. Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-29. Whether it is St. Paul or other saints, it seems that the life of a saint is usually filled with suffering. Why do you think this is?

Allow the group to discuss. Possible answers include: God is seeking to purify the person. God is allowing the person to rely completely on Him. God is allowing them to give witness of faithfulness despite the obstacles that they faced.

9. In an earlier chapter, you developed a mission statement. In the mission that God has given you or will give you, what suffering do you think you will have to endure?

Allow the group to discuss.

10. St. Therese once said, “My God, I choose all! I do not want to be a saint by halves, I’m not afraid to suffer for You, I fear only one thing: to keep my own will; so take it, for I choose all that You will!” How do we develop this attitude of not being “saints by halves,” especially when we are in the midst of suffering?

Allow the group to discuss. Possible answers include: building up the virtue of perseverance, keeping a consistent prayer life, receiving the sacraments frequently.

11. If you could choose one thing you want to take away from this entire study, what would it be and why?

Allow the group to discuss.

EVANGELIZATION AND FEAR HANDOUT

By Jeremy Rivera

Consider the following list and rank them in order from 1-5, one being the greatest fear or hesitation to sharing your faith. Please be as honest with yourself as possible in ranking which fears are the greatest for you:

- _____ Afraid I will be asked a question I do not know
- _____ Afraid they will ask about a moral issue I may not be equipped to answer (e.g., same sex marriage), in which my response could turn them off from Christ and the Catholic Church
- _____ Afraid of what their perception of me will be if I do share with them
- _____ Afraid it will cost me my friendship or relationship with them
- _____ Afraid I will offend them in some way

After you rank these fears, split up into group of 2-3 and take 6 minutes to brainstorm answers about how to respond to these fears. Afterwards, share your best 1-2 ideas.

ANSWERS TO THE VARIOUS FEARS

#1 I'm afraid I will be asked a question I don't know or that I will misrepresent God or the Church.

Suggestion #1: Not knowing an answer to a question is okay. While we strive to be prepared to give a reason for our hope, in no way does this make us responsible to respond perfectly to people's often challenging and complex questions about Christianity or the Catholic Church. Give yourself permission to say, "I don't know, but I can find out and get back to you." Sometimes we make the opposite mistake of coming across as a 'know it all' and it's refreshing for a non-Believer to meet a Christian who is still seeking and has the honesty to say, "I don't know."

Suggestion #2: Tell your story. No one can argue with the power of a changed life. God has called us to be faithful witnesses, people who confess Christ before men. This can be very effective by learning how to share your personal story of how your life has been touched and transformed by the Risen Christ.

#2 Afraid they will ask about a moral issue I may not be equipped to answer (i.e., same sex marriage or contraception), which could turn them off from Christ and the Catholic Church.

Suggestion: Often, moral issues like these serve as smoke screens to the real issues going on in their lives. Instead of surrendering to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we often want to look for excuses to justify our lifestyle or behavior that is in contradiction to the Christian faith; such as problems with the organized Church hierarchy or moral teachings. We cannot let these smoke screens prevent us from

engaging in dialogue about Jesus Christ, his life, his teachings and his death and resurrection. There is often a question behind the question and it is there at the root that we bring the light and love of Christ.

#3 I'm afraid of what their perception of me will be if I do share with them.

Suggestion #1: Though funny, the saying also tends to be true that "you wouldn't care so much about what people think about you if you realized how little they did." Often times, our concern with our image is an issue of unhealthy pride and vanity. Sometimes, the greatest way to get over our fear of rejection is to be rejected. Everyone will not always like us, especially if it means remaining faithful to our loyalty and devotion to Christ as Lord.

Suggestion #2: While their perception of you may change, how do you know it will not change for the better? In the relativistic culture of our time, it is rare to meet people who live with conviction and stand for something they believe in. Speaking the truth in love or refusing to go along with the crowd is also a form of evangelization.

#4 I'm afraid it will cost me my friendship or relationship with them.

Suggestion: While we hope and pray that sharing Christ with a friend or family member would strengthen the relationship, being a Christian (as we learned previously) doesn't come without its cost. However, since we are called to continually reach out and love non-believers, ending a friendship or relationship except for extreme circumstances, is never what we would hope for. God is all about relationship, therefore, we shouldn't allow someone's rejection of

Christ keep us from remaining involved in his or her life. God never gives up on people and it is often this slow kind of patient love that penetrates the hardened heart. If someone does not want to be in friendship with you because of your faith or your attempts to share Christ with him or her, continue to pray for them and for grace to bear the rejection for His sake.

#5 I am afraid I will offend them in some way.

Suggestion: Even though the Gospel, which by itself can at times offend one's sense of independence and worldliness; as the messenger, you do not have to be. For example, declaring certain truths to be absolute can irritate someone who believes all truth is relative, but the manner and tone in which you share your beliefs and convictions (when coupled with compelling reasons) can say even more.