

GOD WITH US

Part 9: ACTS

Message 2 – The Ministry in Jerusalem

Acts 3-7

Introduction

Luke records the progress of the gospel in 3 geographical stages: Jerusalem > Judea/Samaria > the remote parts of earth (as outlined in Acts 1:8). In the first phase, the apostles present the message of the crucified and risen Lord to their fellow countrymen *in Jerusalem*. This is something like a *re-offer* of the message of salvation to the very people that rejected and crucified Jesus. While this *re-offer* was welcomed among the common people (the number of believers swelled from 120 to more than 5,000), the religious leaders continued to reject the apostolic message concerning Jesus the Messiah. After much conflict and persecution, the Jerusalem phase of ministry comes to a head with the testimony of Stephen, a young Jewish man who was a devout follower of Jesus. With his execution by stoning, it was as if the Jewish leaders were slamming the door on the apostolic re-offer of the gospel of forgiveness and redemption through the crucified and risen Savior/Messiah Jesus.

The Healing of the Lame Man at the Temple: 3:1-10

The Jerusalem-ministry section opens with a healing miracle at the temple. Peter and John were going to the temple for the afternoon prayer time, indicating that they were still participating in the religious customs of the Jews. The lame man was begging for alms from the worshippers entering the temple. Peter healed him in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (3:6).

The stir caused by this miracle gave Peter the opportunity to preach his 2nd sermon concerning the crucified and risen Lord.

Peter Proclaims Christ: 3:11-26

Just as in his 1st sermon (Acts 2), Peter explained that *God had exalted* the same Jesus that *they had crucified*.

“The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus. You handed Him over to be killed, and you disowned Him before Pilate, though he had decided to let Him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the Author of life, but God raised Him from the dead. We are witnesses of this” (3:13-15).

He challenged the people to “repent and turn to God” so that they could be forgiven (same in 2:38,39). He said that they had “*acted in ignorance, as your leaders did*” (3:17). In the O.T. there was a distinction between sins of rebellion and sins of ignorance (see Numbers 15:22-31).

Peter and John before the Jewish Sanhedrin: 4:1-22

As Peter was speaking, the temple priests and guards came up and arrested him, along with John, putting them in jail for the night. They were disturbed that Peter and John were proclaiming the name of JESUS. The next day, the Sanhedrin (Jewish Council) convened to examine Peter and John. This was the same Council that had rejected Jesus and taken Him to Pilate for execution. Peter was boldly empowered to respond:

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (4:8-12).

The leaders were amazed at the wisdom and courage of Peter and John, since they were “*unschooled, ordinary men.*” Yet, they also recognized that they had been “*with Jesus.*” After conferring in private, the Council decided to command Peter and John to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. The apostles’ response is firm:

Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to Him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (4:19,20).

No other name under heaven by which we must be saved. No other duty than to obey God, not men. These were the core convictions of the first Christians. There was both urgency and obligation underlying their witness. They could never stop speaking about the only hope for humanity. How about you? What keeps you from speaking out to your sphere of influence about Jesus? Do you believe that He truly is the only hope for salvation? Do you obey God, rather than obeying the pressures of culture to be silent about such issues? Remember: The book of Acts was given to us not just as a history book; but as a challenge. Do we live like they lived? Do we believe like they believed?

A Prayer Meeting: 4:23-31

After their release, Peter and John returned to the core group of disciples and entered into a time of worship and prayer. They cited Psalm 2 which speaks of nations raging against the Sovereign King of heaven. They praised God that HE WAS IN CONTROL, no matter what the leaders tried to do. Finally, they asked:

“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable Your servants to speak Your word with great boldness. Stretch out Your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of Your holy servant Jesus” (4:29,30).

God answered their prayer in a powerful way:

“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (4:31).

In Acts, there is much emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit, Who resides in believers. But it is important to note the KEY FRUIT that the Holy Spirit produced in these early believers when they were “filled with the Spirit.” The key fruit was Spirit-empowered witnessing. The Spirit continually filled (empowered) believers to speak out boldly about Jesus, no matter what the circumstances were. This is the one thing that the Holy Spirit is most concerned with: The advancement of the name of Jesus. Go back to the key verse, Acts 1:8, and you will find it right there: “You shall receive POWER when the HOLY SPIRIT comes upon you, and you shall be My WITNESSES . . .”. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill (empower) you today. Then, watch for opportunities to make the love of Jesus known to people He brings across your path.

Summary: Believers Share Their Possessions: 4:32-35

Luke has summaries sprinkled through the book of Acts. This one focuses on the sharing of possessions. Barnabas is highlighted as an example of generosity. By selling their possessions, the early Christians freed up resources to meet pressing needs within their growing community of faith. This summary is a literary prelude to the next scene in the book of Acts, involving a couple who tried to side-step genuine generosity.

The Death of Ananias and Sapphira: 5:1-11

Comments from Shirley

Sapphira's name comes from the word "Sapphire", a beautiful blue gemstone. Sadly, her sparkle stands out as a stern warning, rather than an example to follow. She was married to Ananias and they were part of the early Christian Church in Jerusalem. From their story, we learn that temptation to lie and to deceive are still very real temptations that all believers can give in to.

It was illegal to be a Christian, and believers were losing their jobs and their finances. The community generously shared their resources, although there was no obligation to give away all of their wealth. Acts 4:34 tells us that from time to time people would sell their land or even their home to free up resources. Barnabas, whose name means "encouragement," had sold his land and brought all of the earnings to the apostles. He was a great example of generosity.

Perhaps Ananias wanted to shine like Barnabas and receive the praise of the community. His actions would make him look good on the outside; but, inwardly his heart and motives were not like his, and Satan deceived him into believing that he could lie to Peter, and all would still go well.

He sold some land but wanted to keep back part of the earnings for himself but deceive everyone into thinking he gave it all. He could have honestly said that he was giving just a portion of his earnings. Sapphira had full knowledge of him keeping back some of the earnings in secret.

Just prior to this incident, Luke records a key principle Peter and John declared to the Jewish leaders. They said, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you, rather than obey God!" The higher Law was to obey God, not men. Sapphira knew that it was right to obey God, rather than stand by and watch her own husband go against God's Word. She had a right as his wife and sister in Christ, to remind him of God's ways- to be honest, to practice integrity, not deceit. But, she didn't.

Perhaps she shared his fear that if they gave the full amount, God wouldn't take care of their own needs. Or, perhaps she didn't believe that to lie was a big deal to God. They rationalized their actions somehow. To rationalize even the smallest behavior or habit, is to disregard God's grace and His holiness.

When Sapphira went to the apostles 3 hours after Ananias had died for his lie and deceit, she was given a chance to tell the truth. Peter asked her, "Is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes" she said, "that is the price." Peter declared that she and Ananias had agreed to "test the Spirit of the LORD." She died instantly like her husband, causing great fear and dismay among the community.

Thankfully, we don't drop dead when we tell a lie or deceive, but we will have a guilty conscience if our hearts are tender. We need to admit that our sin is first against God as Peter declared. Then we must admit the impact it has had on the other person. And as a wife, it is a good reminder from Proverbs 31:12, which says, "An excellent wife... is to do good to her husband, not harm". It is good to speak up for the truth with courage, even if it is not received well.

This story is a challenge to us all to be generous for the right reasons, and not to impress people. To be honest and to speak up for the truth. To remember God sees and rewards, but He also disciplines and corrects.

Why did God bring such a severe judgment down on Ananias and Sapphira? Probably because this was the very beginning of the Christian community, and they were being moved by Satan (5:3) to introduce deception at such a crucial, life-forming moment. A similar severe judgment fell upon a man named Achan, who deceptively hid resources just as Israel began their new life as a nation in the Promised Land (see Joshua 7). Two key values were being formed in the early Church at this critical time: 1) The practice of *generosity*, and 2) The leadership *authority* of the apostles. The actions of Ananias and Sapphira were a Satanically inspired attack designed to undermine both values in the life of the fledgling church. Their deaths had an impact on everyone:

"Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events" (5:11).

Summary: Apostolic Authority: 5:12-16

"The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's

Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed."

The Apostles Arrested a 2nd time: 5:17-42

The tension between the apostles and the religious leaders continued to escalate. They were arrested again and put in prison for the night. When the Sanhedrin convened the next morning, the prisoners were nowhere to be found! An angel of the Lord had miraculously released them and by morning they were in the temple preaching again about Jesus.

Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them" (5:25-26).

When they were finally arrested again and brought before the Council, they repeated the same message they had given before:

Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging Him on a cross. God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Savior that He might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him" (5:29-32).

The Council wanted to put Peter and the other apostles to death. But a respected leader named Gamaliel advised them to pursue a more moderate "wait and see" course of action:

"Men of Israel . . . I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God" (5:38,39).

God-fighters (Greek: theo-machoi). *You don't want to be God-fighters! You will lose!* Gamaliel succeeded in averting the execution of the apostles. The Council had them flogged and then released them.

Note: **Gamaliel** is an important secondary figure in the story. He was one of the most highly respected rabbis in that day. One of his key students was a young Jewish man named Saul (see Acts 22:3), who would later become the apostle Paul. While Gamaliel counseled a policy of “wait and see” with regard to the disciples of Jesus, his pupil, Saul, adopted a policy of fierce aggression, to the point of becoming *the lead persecutor* against the Christians (Acts 8:1-3). Here was a case of a student failing to heed the wisdom of his mentor. Saul was a “God-fighter,” and he lost in the end!

How did the apostles respond to their severe flogging?

“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah” (5:41-42).

What's the worst thing that has ever happened to you as a result of being a Christ-follower? Maybe you've lost friends. Or lost an opportunity to be part of a team. Or lost a job. Or lost respect from a peer group. Or lost the companionship of someone you loved dearly. Or lost family relationships. Jesus made it clear that there **WOULD BE** a cost associated with our attachment to HIM (see Matthew 10:34-39). The question is: Are we willing, if necessary, to accept the cost of being His followers? How about you? What is your love for Jesus costing you right now?

The Choosing Seven Helpers: 6:1-7

The organizational structure of the early Christian community had to catch up with the rapid growth. Within months, there were 10,000+ people connected to the movement, far too many for the 12 apostles to direct and care for. The first church dispute broke out as the Hellenistic (Greek) Jews complained that their widows were not being treated with the respect given to the widows of the Hebrew Jews at the communal mealtimes. Thus, the apostles appointed 7 helpers to assist in making sure the daily needs of the community were being met fairly and without favoritism.

A division of duties occurred at this point, which later gave rise to the distinction between the duties of “deacons” (the Greek word means “servants”) and “elders” (also called “overseers”). Peter initiated the division of duties:

“It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (6:3-4).

In the future organization of the church there would be deacons and deaconesses who focused on the *tangible needs* of the churches. The elders would focus on the *spiritual direction* of the churches (see 1 Timothy 3 and Titus).

Stephen Arrested: 6:8-14

Stephen was one of the 7 men chosen to serve the practical needs of the early church. Yet, he proved to be a *spiritual powerhouse* with gifts of evangelism and miracle-working.

“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke” (6:8-10).

Stephen was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin for trial. The charges leveled against him were that he *dishonored the Temple, the Law and the Law-giver, Moses*.

“This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us” (6:13,14).

His bold testimony is one of the high points of the book of Acts. It is also a sweeping review of the entire Old Testament history.

The Testimony of Stephen: 6:15 – 7:53

Peter and John had made appearances before the Sanhedrin, and

given brief testimony to the risen Christ. It was left to Stephen, however, to give the complete story to the Jewish leaders.

- **7:2-8.** He began with God's appearances to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; noting how circumcision was given to them as a sign of the covenant relationship between Israel and God.

- **7:9-16.** He reminded them of how Joseph was sold into Egypt by his brothers; how he ascended to become a ruler in Pharaoh's palace; and how the rest of the clan, including Jacob, ended up moving into Egypt to be saved by Joseph. The *rejected deliverer theme* begins here, and will continue in his speech.

- **7:17-43.** He spoke about how God raised up Moses to be the deliverer for God's people; how Moses was *rejected by his own people* when he was 40 years old; and then how God used Moses to be their deliverer when he was 80.

"This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness . . . But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt" (7:35,36,39).

Stephen also reminded them of Moses' prophecy: ***"God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people" (Acts 7:37; Deuteronomy 18:15).*** He was telling them that *Jesus* was the Moses-like prophet . . . sent by God, yet *rejected* by the people.

- **7:44-50.** Stephen continued by narrating how Joshua led the people into the Promised Land, bringing with him the *tabernacle* that Moses had constructed in the wilderness. He quoted Isaiah 66:1,2 to remind them that *God does not dwell in a house made by human hands*. Recall that Stephen was accused of speaking about the destruction *of the temple*.

- **7:51-53.** Stephen concluded by accusing the leaders of being hard-hearted, just like their ancestors the prophets spoke to:

"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors

did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered Him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it” (7:51-53).

The Stoning of Stephen: 7:54-60

The Romans did not permit the Jews to enforce the death penalty. Yet, they stoned Stephen to death in a complete rage. As Stephen died, he had a vision of heaven . . . and a parting word for his executioners:

Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God . . . While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep (7:55-56; 59-60).

Like Jesus, Stephen prayed that God would forgive his executioners. His dying breath was his prayer for forgiveness!

Those who stoned Stephen ***“laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul” (7:58)***. Saul was probably about the same age as Stephen.

The stoning of Stephen was like a resounding NO from the Jewish leaders to the gracious *re-offer* of the good news concerning Jesus. They had rejected Him the first time . . . now they had rejected His messengers the second time. The mission in Jerusalem comes to a formal close with the final breath of Stephen. God will now propel the Christian witnesses out from Jerusalem to the wider world, with a special emphasis on the *Gentile* world.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you admire most about the character of these early Christian witnesses described in Acts 3-7?
2. What are your thoughts about how the first Christians did life together? In *community*?
3. What are your takeaways from the life, ministry and death of Stephen (Acts 6,7)? What keeps you from being a bold witness?

ACTS

3. MINISTRY IN JUDEA & SAMARIA: Acts 8-12 STUDY AHEAD

In this section, we see how the gospel began to spread out into stage 2 of the mission – to Judea and Samaria (see Acts 1:8). Amazing things happened in this part of the story, as walls came down between Jew & Samaritan, and between Jew & Gentile.

Acts 8:3. What impact was Saul having on the early church?

Acts 8:4-25. The gospel spread into Samaria, through Philip the evangelist. Note the role of the *Holy Spirit* here.

Acts 8:25. Notice that Peter and John preached the gospel “in many Samaritan villages” on their way back to Jerusalem. Was the “Samaritan woman’s” village one of them (John 4)???

Act 8:26-40. Philip was next sent by the Spirit to a road *south-west* of Jerusalem. He spoke the gospel to a man returning to Ethiopia, in northern Africa. What was the Spirit accomplishing in terms of the geographical spread of the gospel?

Acts 9:1-31. Study the conversion of Saul. Look at 9:9. What do you suppose Saul was thinking about for those 3 days? Read 9:15,16. What was God’s specific mission for Saul?

Acts 9:32-43. Find Lydda and Joppa on a Bible map. Which direction was the gospel moving at this point in the story?

Acts 10. Find Caesarea on a Bible map. See the movement of the gospel?

Acts 10:9-23. Compare Peter’s vision with his explanation of what the vision meant (10:28,29; 10:34,35). What did it mean?

Acts 10:30-33. What do we learn about Cornelius here? What does this tell you about God’s care for all people? What is God looking for in the hearts of those who do not yet know Him?

Acts 11:1-18. Why did Peter have to explain his visit to Cornelius’ house to the church leaders in Jerusalem? Did you notice that Luke spends the better part of 2 chapters on this story? Why is it so pivotal in the narrative?

Acts 11:19-30. A new “center” for the Christian movement was

formed in Antioch in Syria. Here the disciples of Jesus were first called “Christians” (11:26). What role did Barnabas and Saul play here? What was Barnabas’ relationship to Saul at this time?

Acts 12:1-18. Persecution intensified greatly back in Jerusalem. James, the brother of John, was killed. God had a different plan for Peter. This is Peter’s last appearance in the story of Acts. How would you describe his role to this point?

Acts 12:19-25. Here we read of what happened to Herod Agrippa, the great opponent of the gospel (note 12:1). If you are interested, you can look up secular research on the death of this Herod. It confirms the biblical account in some amazing ways.