Preparing to Teach Acts 4-5

We’re still in the Jerusalem section of the outline of the book using the Acts 1:8 outline.

1. Witnesses in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7)
2. Witnesses in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-12)
3. Witnesses to Uttermost Parts (Acts 13-28)
(Asia Minor and Europe, ending in Rome, capitol of the world)

For this session’s particular outline, we can break it down as Pheme Perkins did.

e. Witnesses before the council (Acts 4:1-22)
f. Prayer and life in fellowship (Acts 4:23-5:16)
g. Miraculous escape and witness before the council (Acts 5:17-42)

[Perkins, Pheme, *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction: Third Edition* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012), p. 238.]

Another commentator places the bulk of the fourth chapter under his section for initial opposition and the last portion of chapter 4 and the first part of chapter 5 under his section for the inner life of the church. The last part of chapter 5, he labels as the church facing opposition again.

 3.3 Peter and John’s Arrest and Trial (Acts 4:1-22)
 3.4 The Prayer of the Church (Acts 4:23-31)
 4.1 The Fellowship and Generosity of the Church (Acts 4:32-37)
 4.2 The False Generosity of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11)
 5.1 Opposition (Acts 5:12-42)

[Arrington, French L., *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. v.]

Naturally, we’d expect everyone to be, at least interested if not happy, about what had happened to the man who was jumping around, feeling his oats, after being healed in Chapter 3. Peter and John take that opportunity to share about Jesus as the source of their authority to perform that miracle. But, you know that wherever the Holy Spirit is active, opposition isn’t going to be far behind.

So, in my translation of Acts 4:1, I noticed immediately the present tense reflected in my translation: ***1) And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the commander [root idea is strategist] of the temple [guard], and the Sadducees stood against them.* [PJT]** They hadn’t even finished sharing when the big guns, the authorities show up. The commander, known as the στρατηγὸς, is based on the root from which we get “strategy” and “strategic” in English. He is also known as the “Segen” in Hebrew or the ‘ish har habayith (pronounce “eesh hahr hah-BYE-ihth”) or “man of the mountain.” [Bruce, F. F., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974—original 1954), p. 95, n. 4.]

A mountain? What mountain? Ah, let me show you a diagram of temple hill in the days of the apostles. That red oval? It’s identifying a fortress originally known as the “Mountain of the House.” [Lightfoot, John B., *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. F. Dove, 1823), p. 69.] To give you some geographical perspective, the arrow shows where the “wailing wall” is where you visit the temple mount today. Probably going back to the time of Solomon’s building of the temple, it was called the “Mountain” of God’s house because fortresses were usually placed on mountains and this was the highest point in the area [Clark, K. W., “Antonia, Tower of” in Buttrick, G. A. et. al. (editors) *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Volume I: A-D* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 153.]. When Herod rebuilt the temple, he restored the fortress and renamed it in honor of Marcus Antony of “Friends, Romans, and Countrymen” fame. Prior to Herod, the fortress faced outward to defend against external enemies. After Herod, the fortress faced over the temple courts to defend against Jewish insurrectionists [Clark, p. 153].

Historically, the Segen or man of the mountain was the second in command after the high priest. [Bruce, p. 95, n. 4; Conzelmann, Hans, *Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible: Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987—original 1972), p. 32.] This is underscored by the account of Flavius Josephus where he indicates that the high priest and the “commander” were sent to Claudius Caesar in chains to reduce Jewish rebellion [Josephus, Flavius, *The Life and Works of Josephus: Antiquities of the Jews: Book XX, Chapter 6, Paragraph 2* (William Whiston, trans.) \*Philadelphia, PA: John C. Winston, Co., 1957), p. 593.]. Indeed, we even have some idea of how the temple guard worked: “For every night the temple was guarded by twenty-four companies, that keep watch in twenty-four places : to wit, the priests in three places, and the Levites in all the rest.” [Du Veill, Carolus Maria, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. Haddon, 1851), p. 88.] However, some older commentators take this as indicative that the commander was a Roman commander because of the term’s association with the Tower of Antonia, also known as the “Mountain of the House.” [Calvin, cited in Gloag, Paton J. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), p. 139; Lightfoot, p. 69.]

I personally believe that this was the Jewish temple guard and not, at this time the Romans. Note, however, that Paul will have his own encounter at the Tower of Antonia in Acts 21. For me, the point is that Peter and John haven’t even finished their message and three different special interest groups show up to stop the spread of the word. Of course, “priests” would be an obvious interest group and Sadducees show up largely because of the word “resurrection.” The Sadducees were essentially the Ivy League/Upper Crust of Jewish society. As such, their primary interest was maintaining the status quo both politically and theologically.

Politically, they collaborated with the Romans to foster relative peace and stability (which, of course, protected their influence and property) [Bruce, p. 96, n5.]. So, they were stridently opposed to any nationalistic or religious movements that would upset the balance with the Romans. Theologically, they considered themselves “conservatives” and refused to accept oral tradition (sticking strictly to the written texts), the late introduction of the idea of resurrection, or influence of supernatural beings like good and evil spirits [Arrington, p. 45; Bruce, p. 96, n5; Gload, p. 149.]. Since the Sadducees only appear 3x in Acts (here, 5:17, and the section beginning with 23:6), this appearance suggests that these powerbrokers in the temple believed the gospel must be stopped right away.

Finally, you may notice on the slide that I translated the verb for standing as “standing against.” The verb can be “standing by” in readiness, but I have to ask, “In readiness for what?” In The Iliad (Book 11), Patroclus comes to identify Machaon’s wounded body (Paragraph 645) and that verb is used for when he stands and asks the question of his enemies. When I preach on this text, I interpret it that they were spoiling for a fight, taking a hostile stance [Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume III: Acts* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 49.]

Now, if you’re wondering why I’ve spent so much time on this one simple phrase, it’s to say this: not everyone who comes around church or church activities is really looking for God’s Truth. In fact, some people may see God at work in a congregation and decide to come around just to disrupt things at the first convenience. I have one certain spiritual law to share with you, right now, and that is that whenever God starts to work, the devil is going to have an answer. And the devil may use surprising vehicles to accomplish his hostile work. Note that we have the major power factions of the Jews, politically and theologically, represented here as hostile to the gospel.

So, let’s move on. ***2) being worked up because they [Peter and John] were teaching the people and publicly declaring resurrection of the dead by means of Jesus.* [PJT]**

I know my translation reads differently than most, but the Greek verb used here is διαπονούμενοι, pronounced “dih-ah-poh-NOO-mehn-oy” or “thee-ah-poh-NOO-mehn-ee” and meaning to literally work hard or exercise. There’s a saying in the South, and it was used In my family, too. You ask a person who is upset, “What are you so worked up about?” That works for both being angry disproportionately to a problem or worried disproportionately about a problem.

Now, we see that all three parties who were cited in verse 1 have something to lose if the message of Jesus’ resurrection takes hold. The priests have their authority threatened, the Sadducees have their credibility threatened because if Jesus’ resurrection is real, their case for not believing in the resurrection is dead on arrival, and because of the power of the aforementioned two, the commander and his guards have their livelihood threatened if they don’t do something about this “disturbance.”

Things haven’t really changed that much. We live in a day and age when a lot of people get “worked up” about the claims of Jesus. People claim that life after death is a false hope. Some claim that religion doesn’t take our physical lives and our physical world seriously enough. Some claim that believers in Jesus are exclusivist and bring anguish into the world because we aren’t tolerant enough. A lot of people see Christianity as a public nuisance because it gets in the way of their pet sins or ideologies. They would feel more in command without Christianity, so they ridicule it and heap abuse against it and even try to legislate against it.

So, they took the apostles into custody: ***3) And they seized them with their hands and placed them in custody till the next day for it was already evening.* [PJT]** The folks who took Peter and John into custody in order to calm down the mob were saying one thing and acting upon another. They may have said that they put Peter and John into “protective custody” to protect them from the mob, but there was no danger. They may have said that they put the apostles into custody to protect the temple itself from being desecrated by an unruly mob that the apostles had allegedly incited. The reality is that they put Peter and John away for a cooling off period because the apostles were too effective in their message. Notice that they don’t even mention the man who had been healed at this point.

I asked the question on the slides, “Is healing one man worth it?” I believe verse 4 provides the answer to that question. ***4) But many of those who heard the word believed, and the number of men came to be about 5,000.* [PJT]** Some people read this as 5,000 additional men, specifically, see the miracle, hear Peter’s claims, and believe as a result [Du Veill, p. 89; Lightfoot, p. 70.]. Others are careful to point out that this could just be using “men” generically to refer to humankind so that it includes both genders [Gloag, p. 143, but Bruce, p. 96, n6 and Robertson, p. 50 rightly point out that this is the Greek noun, ἀνδρός, used for individual males, not ἄνθρωπος which is sometimes used for humanity]. So, is that doubled for men and their wives?

Knowing the biblical symbolism of numbers known as gematria, it could even be interpreted as: five (5) meaning a handful, since humans have five digits on a hand, a moderately sufficient amount but not as much as you could carry. Then, you multiply it times 1,000, the number 10 (as much as you could possibly carry—abundance) cubed (10\*10\*10 or a divine number of 10s). So, it is a divinely sufficient number, but it is not the divinely abundant number (10,000) or the divinely perfect numbers (12,000 or 144,000). I think it could mean divinely sufficient as representing the number God intended to win for now, but not all the early church would win. But don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that there weren’t a lot of people who responded on that day. I’m saying that this nice round, potentially symbolic number, might be a best estimate Luke obtained from interviewing numerous sources.

But, we’re probably on safe ground if we assume that it may refer to 2,000 additional persons (or, because of the use of “men” multiplied by at least two) added on that day to the 3,000 they added on Pentecost. That would bring the church roll to 5,000 [Gloag, p. 143; Munck, Johannes, *The Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles: Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1967.], p. 14.]

Of course, some people doubt even this 5,000 because they take the low estimate for the entire population of Jerusalem at this time (25,000) and believe that one-fifth of the population believing doesn’t make sense in the light of the trouble and opposition that follows. Yet, some estimates go all the way up to 250,000 where 5,000+ is more reasonable [Marshall, I. Howard, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 98.]. Yet, a lot of people forget that there were circa 3 MILLION people who had come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost and we don’t know how many were still there [Smith, T. C., “Acts” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 10: Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 37]. But there seems no reason to doubt the number, especially if one takes the suggestion that Luke is not merely speaking of citizens of Jerusalem but also of those who believed while on their pilgrimage [Marshall, p. 99.]

The takeaway for you and me, though, is the answer to my question. Yes, it is worth it to get in trouble for the benefit of one person because we don’t know how many others the Lord will influence through our obedience. And, if you think about it, even getting into trouble can provide a chance to witness as it does for Peter and John in the next part of the text.

***5) So, it happened the next day that the rulers, elders, and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem, 6) along with Annas, the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander and those who were of the high priestly family. 7) So, they stood them in the middle and asked, “By means of what power or authority [lit. by means of what name] have YOU accomplished this [thing]?” 8) Then, Peter filled to the brim with the Holy Spirit said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, 9) if you are examining this wonder concerning a good deed for an infirm man by means of which he was made whole [“saved”], 10) know all of you, even all the people of Israel that by means of the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the One whom you crucified, the One God raised from dead, by means of Him this one stands before you well and strong, …* [PJT]**

So, who are these guys? The rulers are the priests, the elders are those with social gravitas, and the scribes are the scholars. The verb I translated as “gathered together” is sometimes translated as “Sanhedrin,” the ruling court for Jewish religion. Actually, every city in that period would usually have a court of 23 judges. Jerusalem had the Great or Grand Sanhedrin with 71 members [Campbell, Constantine R. and Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the New Testament as Christian Scripture: A Literary, Canonical, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), p. 161. It was the final court of appeals for religious Jews with some overlap into political matters.

Isn’t interesting how similar situations occur between both Jesus and the disciples/apostles? “Just as Jesus was arrested and appeared the next day before the Sanhedrin (συνέδριον) in Luke 22:66, so do Peter and John also appear the day after their arrest before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:5-22 (identified as συνέδριον in 4:15).” [Keith, Chris, “The Oddity of the Reference to Jesus in Acts 4:13b” in *Journal of Biblical Literature 134:4* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), p. 796.]

I once referred to this particular crowd as a “hangin’ jury.” That’s a term from the “Wild West” Era in U.S. history where the evidence given at trial didn’t matter because the jury was so bloodthirsty that they wanted to find the defendant guilty whether he was or not. Well, these guys had everything to lose and nothing to gain by recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. In fact, when these interrogators ask their first question in verse 7, the grammatical emphasis of the question is on YOU, meaning Peter and John in quite a scornful “How dare you?” sort of way [Bruce, p. 99; Robertson, p. 50.]. They ask for the power and authority by which Peter and John are acting, but they either don’t really believe there is any, thinking Peter and John are acting on their own, or they attribute the miracle to some unauthorized force.

Perhaps, those who say that the council was “hoping” Peter and John would refer to Jesus as the authority so they could accuse them of heresy are correct [Gloag, p. 146; Maclaren, Alexander, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Volume XII: The Acts: Chapters 1-12:17* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1942), p. 131.]. However, if that’s right, their expectations were turned upside-down because the apostles admitted as much and, as we shall see, there was nothing the religious leaders could do about it.

Others think that the council held to the ancient world belief that all illness and disability was caused by demon possession. Therefore, they were looking for the name of the evil spirit that Peter and John had exorcized [Robertson, p. 50; Smith, p. 38

Some people get confused by the names in this passage because they assume that the high priest position was, as it was for Aaron and his sons in the Pentateuch, a position for life like our Supreme Court appointments. What they forget is that the priesthood changed during or after the Exile and those life appointments no longer occurred [Foakes-Jackson, F. J., *The Moffatt Commentary: Acts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), p. 35. What they forget is also that until the governorship of Vitellius (later to become Emperor), the Romans were appointing the high priests. [ Some would argue that Caiaphas would have properly been high priest at this point because of his close relationship with then governor Pontius Pilate, but even so, Annas/Ananias was a force to be reckoned with [Smith, p. 38.]. “But although no longer high priest, he still retained his authority: he exercised the chief influence during the long priesthood of his son-in-law Caiaphas; and no less than five of his sons— Eleazar, Jonathan, Theophilus, Matthias, and Ananus— were advanced to the office of high priest in his lifetime.” [Gloag, p. 144; Marshall, p. 99.]

It may well be as Foakes-Jackson has suggested: “Luke’s meaning may be that he was the recognized head of the priestly order by reason of his seniority to Caiaphas, who was *de facto* high priest at that time [Foakes-Jackson, p. 35.] It may also be that the title seemed natural on Annas because he was not only Caiaphas’ predecessor, but his father-in-law, so that the title was used for “Caiaphas so by Roman law, Annas so by opinion of the Jews.” [Robertson, p. 50.] We don’t know anything about the John or Alexander referred to here, but Codex Bezae (from the 5th or 6th century) spells “John” as “Jonathan” which would correspond to the high priest son of Annas who was installed by Vitellius [McGregor, G. H. C., “Acts of the Apostles: Introduction and Exegesis” in G. A. Buttrick et. al. (eds.), *The Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Volume IX: Acts-Romans* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1954) p. 65.] Regardless, we know that the odds were stacked against Peter and John. So much so that they needed a good attorney.

And, of course, in verse 8 we discover that God has provided. Peter is filled to the brim with the Holy Spirit. Although one might see this wording as indicating the intermittent filling of the Holy Spirit as opposed to the continual presence of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus [McGregor, p. 66], it is better to understand it as the availability of power that is potentially present all the time [Bruce, p. 99, n16; Marshall, p. 100, n1.]. Indeed, this is the first recorded time that Jesus’ prophecy in Luke 12:11-12 has come true in that the then disciples and now apostles are brought before the synagogue and the Holy Spirit has given Peter the words to say. Although not the exact wording, it also fulfills the promise of Luke 21:14-15 where Jesus says that when they need a defense, He will give them the words to say.

And one way to be certain as to whether something is coming from the Holy Spirit is to observe where the focus is. The focus here, as it always should be, is on the Lord Jesus Christ. But I think we also have to admire Peter’s way of framing the debate. “Is this investigation over something good that was done for a disabled man who is now, as you can clearly see, wholly cured?” And since the physical evidence is right there before the “hangin’ jury” of the Sanhedrin, Peter is inspired to make the faith claim directed at the Lord. That’s the last thing these prosecuting attorneys and hanging judges wanted to hear, but when we get to verse 11, Peter is going to make it even stronger by quoting from Psalm 118.

Before we get there, though, I just want to point out something about the name of Jesus. Performing an action by means of the name of someone meant to do something under someone’s authority, in their honor, and identified as being committed to that someone. Many years ago when I was teaching a seminar for pastors in preparation to teach Acts, I was struck by the following insight.

“The significance which Jesus had for the early church is disclosed in the ‘name’ motif which is woven throughout the fabric of Acts 1-5. The church baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38); they healed in the name of Jesus (Acts 3:6, 16; 4:10); they spoke in his name (Acts 4:17-18); they taught in his name (Acts 4:30). Indeed, it was because the church carried on its activity in Jesus’ name that the Jewish establishment persecuted it (Acts 5:28).” [Blevins, William L., “The Early Church: Acts 1-5” in *Review and Expositor: A Baptist Theological Journal LXXI:4 (Fall, 1974)* (Louisville, KY: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1974), p. 467; see Nienhius, David R*., A Concise Guide to Reading the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), p. 96 for a similar list.]

But, as I mentioned, Peter really pushes the accelerator when he continues by saying that his accusers crucified Jesus and God raised Him from the dead. Not only did they not believe in the resurrection of the dead, but now, they were accused of killing someone that God had raised from the dead in vindication against them. This was a key theological point for the early church. “It was because God had raised up Jesus that the apostles were able to do mighty works (4:10), and to offer to Israel the gift of salvation (4:12). It was the persistent witness to the resurrection that caused the first official opposition from the religious leaders against this new sect (4:1-2; see also 5:31-32).” [Ladd, George Eldon, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 317.]

In case they missed the implications of that one, he continues in verse 11: ***11) This One is “the stone of which” YOU “the builders rejected, the One who became the head of the cornerstone.”* [PJT]**Notice that there is no “YOU” in Psalm 118:22. Peter has inserted this to emphasize the rejection from the authorities and, essentially, put them on trial at the same time as he is [Bruce, p. 99.]. He made it personal [Smith, p. 39.]. To add insult to injury, this verse was one that was considered to be Messianic and which Jesus Himself used in Mark 12:10 after the parable where the tenants leasing the vineyard decided to kill the landlord’s son.

Then, as if he hadn’t made the importance of Jesus as Messiah clear enough, he goes on to preach Jesus as Savior. ***12) And there is no other salvation because neither is there another name under the heavens given to humankind by means of which one must be saved.”* [PJT]**

I should make clear here that I do not agree with those scholars who believe that the name of Jesus is evoked by Peter and John because it is used in baptism and, hence, this salvation is dependent upon baptism [Bultmann, Rudolf, *Theology of the New Testament: Complete in One Volume* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), p. 133.]

I do think the name is very important to Luke’s theology since “…all but two of the nineteen occurrences of the words “Savior,” “saved,” and “salvation” in the Gospels and Acts occur in Luke’s writings.” [Nienhuis, p. 59.] To be precise, these occur in Luke 1:47, 69, 71, 77; 2:11, 30; 3:6; 19:9; Acts 4:12; 7:25; 13:36, 47; 16:17; 27:34; and 28:28. [Nienhuis, p. 59, n6.]

Now, considering the emphasis on religious tolerance and the desire not to be judgmental in our world today, I think we need to hit this pretty hard. A lot of people think it’s unfair that sincere people would miss out on salvation. We need to realize that sincerity is not a truth test. I can sincerely believe the world is flat, that there is a conspiracy to kill me, or that there are Jewish space lasers lighting wildfires across the U.S., but that doesn’t make it so. I can sincerely think that injecting myself with bleach will cure Covid, but it won’t stop me from dying—just read Proverbs 14:12 if you don’t believe me.

And to those who think it is intolerant of us to make a truth claim on behalf of Jesus as the only way to salvation, we should notice that all truth claims are intolerant of their opposite. To a firm believer in evolution which is not guided by God, faith in God as Creator is an infantile lie. To someone who says “All truth is relative,” they had better be aware that this means even that statement is relative.

Most importantly to those of us who believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord, we have to believe Him when He uses the definite article THE to indicate that He is the ONLY way, Truth, and life (John 14:6) or when He uses the definite article to tell us that He is THE gate to salvation in John 10:9. We need to heed 1 Timothy 2:5 when it speaks of ONE Mediator between God and humanity. One means one. [This discussion is well-presented in Gleiser, Norman L., *A Popular Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), pp. 133-134.]

Now, I don’t want to presume upon God’s ability to give a pardon that I don’t understand. All I know is that scripturally, the only SURE way to salvation is to trust in, depend upon Jesus Christ our Lord. Even logically, it seems that He is the only perfect sacrifice, so He would be THE answer. All I know is that from what God has revealed to us, Jesus is the ONLY way, and that’s what Peter understood, too.

***13) Then, seeing the boldness of Peter and John, along with perceiving that they were illiterate and untrained [the Greek sounds like “idiotic”], they were amazed and they recognized that they had been with Jesus.* [PJT]** Here, the scribes know that they’ve “been had.” They have been out-debated by men they wouldn’t approve as readers or teachers in the synagogue. Luke shows their snobbish, Ivy League (if you will) elitism in their assessment but he reports it to us to underscore Peter’s “boldness” as proving “…the reality of divine assistance and thus divine approval.” [Keith, p. 806.]

I like that word, “boldness.” It means more than you think it does. In the Greek, it is **Παρρησίας** and it is pronounced either **“pahr-ray-SIH-ahs”** or **“pah-ree-SEE-ahs”** depending on whether you use the artificial or modern pronunciation. It means to have “standing” in a court of law or sometimes, in the ancient world, to have “standing” in the presence of a potentate/authority. In classical Greek, it suggested the status of a citizen who could freely say anything in the assembly [Schlier, Heinrich, “παρρησία, παρρησιάζομαι” in Gerhard Kittel et al. (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Volume V: Ξ – Πα* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1967), p. 872.]. So here, under the influence, Peter and John are defending themselves as though they have proper standing in a court of religious law for which they haven’t even gone to law school, much less passed the bar examination.

The terms also had the rather nuanced idea of openness and transparency and a confidence or shamelessness, even in the presence of power [Schlier, pp. 872-873]. This very direct way of speaking (under the direction of the Holy Spirit) seems to have connected with the crowd. “It is precisely because the first disciples of Jesus were ‘unschooled’ that the people who listened to Peter and John in the Acts 4 account are said to be ‘astonished’ when those disciples speak so eloquently, even addressing the ‘rulers and elders of the people’ with ‘courage.’ [Longenecker, Bruce W*., In Stone and Story: Early Christianity in the Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), p. 151.] Because of this association with clear, understandable speaking, the word παρρησία was also used to reflect rhetorical sophistication [Schlier, p. 882.], as well. Naturally, since the rough fishermen associated with Jesus had no advantage of rhetorical training, this was an additional surprise to the council.

I like the way one interpreter summed up the situation. He notes:

* They have been backed into a corner by two uneducated men.
* They have incontrovertible physical evidence in the appearance of the lame man now walking (Acts 4:14, 16) in their midst
* If they attack Peter and John directly, the crowd may revolt in sympathy with those who just did a good deed, a bad thing if you at least want to pretend that your authority exists for the good of the people.

“So, the authorities take what is always the first step by any authoritarian leadership--they order Peter and John to keep quiet. Suppression of the press, control of the media, banning of books—the rulers always hope there is some way to keep this sort of thing quiet, some way to control the people’s access to information.” [Willimon, William H., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 49].

Peter’s response was that they would obey God instead of human authority (vv. 19-20). If ever there was a call to civil disobedience, this would be it. This is why I prayed in Jesus’ name at the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors meeting and why I pray in Jesus’ name no matter where I am. We MUST be identified with HIM.

And in verse 21, the authorities did what the authorities always do. They upped the ante. They threatened Peter and John, but they couldn’t stop the revival. Interestingly, as I may have noted last session, the man is identified as being 40 years old in verse 22. After 40 years being unable to walk, that same amount of time as Israel wandered in the wilderness, the man could finally move and work. So, they are released…THIS TIME!

Then, the first thing I notice is that Peter and John leave the custody of the Sanhedrin and head right away to meet with the other people in the church (v. 23). They share the situation with the church and the first thing the church does is to pray. They don’t have a clinic or training session. They don’t schedule a revival meeting. They don’t create a new church program. They don’t suggest books to read on the subject of dealing with the authorities in a “culture war.” They don’t make excuses as to why they’re going to have to miss a few services or why they have to resign their positions. They don’t accuse the church leaders of being lazy or simply consign everything to being in the “last days” as an excuse to do nothing. Instead, they pray. And that’s exactly what we should do in any crisis or opportunity. We should gather together and pray with one accord.

The second thing I notice, and this one surprised me, is how they prayed—especially how they addressed God. This is the word, δέσποτα, pronounced “DEHS-poh-tah”—the Greek noun from which we get the word, “despot.” Now, since that word often means “tyrant,” as in the Latin. I don’t think we’d feel very comfortable opening a prayer by appealing to God as “Tyrant.” Yet, the noun refers to a ruler who is in absolute authority and the New Testament church wanted to underscore just how powerful God was and how much authority God wielded. Some translations use words to emphasize the sovereignty of God in translating this prayer, but let’s face it, the early church is admitting to God that “He’s the baddest!” They’re saying that if God wanted to be, God COULD be the fiercest tyrant of them all.

And why was God so powerful? Why does God wield this authority? It is because God is Creator. God didn’t merely make the solid ground where we feel comfortable standing, the times when life was easy, but God created the seas that seemed so threatening and unsettling to the Hebrews and the heavens beyond where they could see. God not only created all, but God populated all. Therefore, it all belongs to God. It’s all God’s intellectual and real property.

In verses 25-26, they **[Click]** quote from Psalm 2. Psalm 2 was used to celebrate Israel’s king. **[Click]** It was a royal psalm that the New Testament church later “baptized” into a Messianic psalm. **[Click]** It emphasizes that God has chosen a king/Messiah to rule over God’s people, but recognizes that those who are not God’s people aren’t going to like it. So, it describes the heathen nations as “raging,” gathering together and conspiring against God’s people in general and the Messiah in specific. To be sure, the psalmist considered the Davidic King to be the Anointed or Messiah (which means Anointed) and conspiracies against that King to be challenges to God’s authority. So, the psalmist pictured God as hooting and howling in derision at the feeble attempts of worldly kings and generals plotting against God’s people.

Because they knew the Hebrew scripture, the early church was able to draw from it in a time of crisis and lift that scripture up to God. Naturally, God didn’t need to be reminded of His own words, but the early church DID need to be reminded of God’s words and the speaking of those familiar words was an act of faith in agreeing with God. In the same way, I challenge you all to pray the scripture—not just the psalms, but the prayers of Paul and even this prayer. We don’t do this because *God* needs to be reminded, but we need to do it as a means of *agreeing* with God. How much more agreement can we have than to claim His Word in prayer?

**[Slide 7]** So, powerful prayer begins with the admission of God’s authority and continues by praying the scripture and ensuring that our prayer is in alignment with the Bible. BUT, the early church didn’t stop with the historical prayer. They didn’t just read the scripture and let it stay in the past. Nope! They reapplied it and reinterpreted it in the light of their own experience. They recognized that just as the heathen authorities had stood against Israel’s king and people in the past, the rival authorities of their age had stood against Jesus Christ, the True Messiah.

In verses 27-28, they lump Herod who slaughtered the innocents, Pilate who washed his hands and allowed the crucifixion of Christ, the Gentile soldiers who executed the sentence upon Christ, and the Hebrew authorities and people who instigated the action all together. But the intriguing thing is that the early church states in these verses that these villains conspired against Jesus but they DID what God’s hand (God’s own efforts) and God’s counsel (God’s royal plan) had determined needed to be done—far in advance. Their free will played into God’s MASTER PLAN.

So, if these villains were acting such that they merely played into God’s hand with regard to Jesus, all of their machinations against the church could also play into God’s hand. In the same way that Psalm 2:4-5 spoke of God laughing derisively at these weak machinations of God’s enemies, guess what the church prays for? Boldness, that right of standing we discussed earlier. “Peter’s concern seems rather to affirm the sovereignty of God even over the rebellions of men.” [Stagg, Frank, *New Testament Theology* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1962), p. 131.]

At the same time, Peter’s Messianic claim and the way he positions it by interpreting the Psalm in the light of Judah’s recent history and contemporary situation fervently demonstrates what Nienhuis calls a key point. “Christianity is not conceived of in Acts as a religion separate from Judaism; what came to be called ‘Christianity’ emerged as a divinely initiated movement *within* Judaism.” [Nienhuis, p. 95.]

**[Click]** In verse 29, they ask God to pay attention to the malevolence of their enemies and the important task assigned to God’s servants. Do they ask for a special dispensation to keep from being thrown into prison, beaten, stoned, or crucified? They do not! Instead, they pray for BOLDNESS, that transparency, shamelessness, and clear-speaking we’ve already discussed.

If you were to read the rest of Psalm 2, you’d notice that verses 7-9 are heavy on the idea of the king/messiah as God’s chosen ruler who will become very powerful and mete out justice against God’s enemies. It offers that strange wording where the earthly king of Israel was called “God’s son” in order to foreshadow the One from the line of David who would truly be “God’s Son.” In the same way, when the early church remembered this Psalm, they emphasized the “name of Jesus” (v. 30).

The early church didn’t merely pray for words, they prayed for deeds. They asked for God’s mighty acts to demonstrate the meaning (signs) and the supernatural potential (wonders) that can be done by means of the name of Jesus, God’s holy child. Note that it is NOT by what is done by means of the name of church, denomination, pastor, evangelist, or para-church organization. These signs and wonders are to be done by the power of Jesus’ name. It is through Jesus that God intended to change the world and it is only through Jesus that we can expect to change the lives and bless the lives of those that we encounter.

And the great thing was that where Psalm 2:12 emphasized the peril of saying “No” to God’s chosen and the blessing of saying “Yes” to God’s chosen, the early church left their prayer with a sense of purpose, ready for action (v. 31). After observing the interplay between *divine deeds* and *human words* because “The mighty acts of healing must be interpreted, proclaimed, witnessed, and defended through words. There is also an interplay of *witness* and *worship*. The community moved from its time of prayer to a time of confrontation with the misery of the world in the form of a crippled man.” [Willimon, pp. 50-51.] Then, after the confrontation with the authorities, they withdrew into prayer to seek the boldness to witness effectively again. “In this rhythm of *action* and *speech, witness* and *worship*, the church discovers the source of its life. [Willimon, p. 51.]

So then, in verse 31, we get to the inner life of the church. ***32) But the vast amount [plenitude / multitude] of believers were of a singular determination (heart) and a singular mind (soul) and none of them said that anything they owned was theirs, BUT they had everything common.* [PJT]**If you have socialist leanings, don’t get too excited here. “Pooling goods involved selling lands and properties, and liquidating capital assets followed (4:34, 37). Early commentators saw here a cause for the later poverty of the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:29; 2 Corinthians 8, 9). Luke makes no such value judgment but simply reports the facts as a proof of Christian concern for all.” [Martin, Ralph P., *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students: Volume 2: The Acts, The Letters, The Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994—original 1978), p. 81.]

“What is often called the community of property in the earliest church on the basis of Acts 2:45; 4:34ff, is in reality a practical sharing of property on the basis of love. To call this actual communism is out of the question, for it lacks both a social program and organized production.” [Bultmann, p. 62.]

***33) And the apostles were given GREAT POWER in witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, GREAT GRACE was upon all of them, 34) for none of them was lacking because those who possessed fields and homes sold them, and carried the proceeds of the things sold, 35) and placed the [proceeds] at the feet of the apostles, but it was given to each according to those who had a need. 36) And Joseph, the one who was called Barnabas by the apostles (that is being interpreted, Son of Help [Consolation, Patronage, or Assistance], a Levite who was from Cyprus, 37) having a field, sold it and carried the riches and placed them at the feet of the disciples.* [PJT]**

The Bible follows with a positive example and a negative example. So, let’s get back to Barnabas. His name is Joseph (v. 36), whose name means “God adds”—a name of blessing if I’ve ever heard one, with the nickname, Barnabas (sometimes translated from the Aramaic as “Son of encouragement,” “Son of exhortation,” or more literally as “Son of prophecy,” but here stated as “Son of help” or “Son of consolation” using the same root as that from which we get the Holy Spirit as “Comforter” or “Helper.”

We’re told that he is a Levite, interesting in the fact that Levites were precluded from owning personal property throughout most of the Old Testament, and that he wasfrom Cyprus (a Mediterranean island not part of Israel – perhaps, he sold his island property to meet the church’s needs?). We don’t exactly how he got the land and the Greek word used for it suggests an open field, possibly an undeveloped field. Yet, the important fact is that this person who could have relied upon personal privilege (as a Levite, he had many privileges in terms of leading in worship and making claims on the temple offerings) went out of his way to meet the needs of the early church. He liquidated his land and brought the money to the feet of the apostles.

So, if you have a curious mind like me, you’re probably wondering why Luke singled Barnabas out if everyone was selling their tangible assets and bringing them to the apostles to meet needs. I like what an old Scottish Baptist preacher from the late 19th and early 20th century named Alexander MacLaren wrote. In his commentary, he suggested that Barnabas preceded Ananias for the same reason that substance precedes shadow. [Maclaren, p. 176.] There had to be a positive example before there could be a distorted example, someone who gave everything before we would realize that holding back cheats both ourselves and the church. “The generous spirit of Barnabas stands in bold relief against the selfishness and deceit of Ananias and Sapphira.” [Arrington, p. 55.]

I don’t believe this scene was like some commentators who picture the apostles as seated high above the rest of the congregation so that the gold and silver were placed below their feet. There really isn’t any evidence to support that. Rather, I picture the apostles standing in front of the congregation and those who wished to support the Lord’s work coming forward to contribute much like one makes a decision during an altar call or invitation, today. Indeed, ever worshipped in an African-American church? The tradition is that everyone walks in front of the church and puts their offerings in the plates.

And, of course, all of us who have seen greedy preachers and know that, in best practices, the pastor never touches the money, are probably also curious about this silver being placed at the feet of the apostles. I want to urge you not to get the wrong idea. The church hadn’t selected the SEVEN yet to administer the money and take care of the physical needs of the church members, so the only way to bring money and place it out in the open where everyone could see was to place it at the feet of the apostles who, in turn, were most likely at the front of the congregation where they could visibly teach and testify.

And while I’m talking about openness, let me just say that God’s business needs to be open. A lot of churches are afraid to audit the church’s books because they are afraid that a treasurer or reporting secretary will think the church is suspicious. Well, since I know of a church in Georgia that had more than $400,000 embezzled by its treasurer and another less than 10 miles away from it that had about $75,000 stolen from it and a church in Oklahoma that just discovered more than $100,000 mysteriously missing, I believe it’s a good idea for God’s people to be accountable. I realize that, as one ministry of a larger congregation, our “books” are tied to the mother church’s finances, but we also need to make sure that our people know where their offerings are going. Even if that means they think Pastor Johnny makes too much.

Joseph (to whom God had apparently added this property) Barnabas (the one who lived up to his name by encouraging, helping, and providing an example for others) didn’t hold anything back. Even for those of us who may not own property, have a nice stock portfolio, or drive nice cars, Barnabas is an example. He held nothing back, but we often hold back our personal energy, our time, our talents, and our dedication. We often have that back row mentality that says, “I’m here, Lord. I’m in for the minimum. I don’t want to get into trouble, but I don’t want to get too involved, either.”

It's also significant that Barnabas is introduced here. Unlike the other apostles, he is a Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jew. He represents the introduction of the first main character outside the inner circle and foreshadows the greater mission beyond Jerusalem in the future [Foakes-Jackson, p. 40.]. Plus, the descriptions associate with his name suggest that he was already demonstrating Christian nurture with the other members already in the church.

***5:1) But a man who was named*** ***Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, 2) and embezzled [lit. “set apart from”] part of the proceeds, and his wife was involved [look up] with him, and he carried part of it and laid it at the feet of the apostles. 3) But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled up your heart for you to try to deceive the Holy Spirit, and embezzle (set apart from) the proceeds from the land? 4) Didn’t it remain yours alone, and did you not possess the power to sell it? Why, therefore, did you decide this thing in your heart? You didn’t [try to] deceive men, but God.” 5) Hearing these words, Ananias fell down and expired and a GREAT FEAR came upon all the ones who heard. 6) But the young men rose up and carried him out and buried him.* [PJT]**

Since I already quoted the old Scottish preacher once, let me give you his take on this. “It was very likely a pure impulse which led him and his wife to agree to sell their land; and it was only when they had the money in their hands, and had to take the decisive step of parting with it, and reducing themselves to pennilessness, that they found the surrender harder than they could carry out. Satan spoils many a well-begun work, and we often break down half-way…” [Maclaren, p. 176.].

So, in contrast to Barnabas, we see two other believers:Ananias (whose very name means “favored by God”) and Sapphira (whose name meant “beautiful” in Aramaic). Let’s assume that the favor Ananias had received from God was wealth. That would sort of make Sapphira his “trophy wife.” Their very names exude success and attractiveness. Humanly speaking, they have it all.

But, Ananias and Sapphira aren’t satisfied with “having it all” in the human sense. They want to become big wheels in the church, too. They, like many humans, want to eat their cake and have it, too. But, as we all learned as little kids, when you eat that cookie now, you don’t have it to eat later.

Now, the Greek noun translated as “possession” in verse 1 of Chapter 5 is not that same noun as that translated as “field” or “land” in verse 37 of Chapter 4. The noun in Chapter 5 normally meant “personal possession.” In later Greek, it could also mean “land” or “real property,” but in traditional usage (of which I can only assume that Dr. Luke was tremendously familiar), it represented something smaller and more personal than the large property implied in the noun used for Barnabas’ land. So, at least implied in the wording, is the suggestion that even if Ananias and Sapphira had given the entire amount, it wouldn’t have been quite as big a deal as that of Barnabas.

Remember, of course, that in God’s eyes, it isn’t the number of zeros after the digit that matters—the size of the donation, it is the willingness of the giver. And in this case, they weren’t even willing to give all that they had received. They wanted to have the credit, the reputation, without giving the gift.

Now, check out what it says in verse 2 of Chapter 5. It says that they “kept back” or more literally “set apart from” part of the price. The verb used here (and again in verse 3) is the same verb that Greek Jews used to translate the Hebrew of Joshua [Conzelmann, p. 37; Munck, p. 40]. In Joshua, the Israelites were told to take no prisoners from Jericho and to destroy anything that could not be given to God. There was a reason for that. The more of Palestine that the Jews assimilated, the more chance they had to be alienated from their dependence upon God. So, as they began to claim the promise, they were ordered to keep nothing—either destroy it or give it to God.

Now, the truth is that Ananias didn’t have to die. He could have repented. Instead, he dies in shock and everyone who is witness to this is in shock as well. Where we closed out Chapter 4 with the disciples preaching with Great Power and the congregation being cared for with Great Grace, we now have a pall of Great Fear come over everyone in verse 5. Now, remember, “fear” in the Bible has both the familiar meaning of being afraid of something that frightens us (“phobos,” the noun used here is the word from which we get the English, “phobia.”) and the undertone of hushed reverence when we encounter the inexplicable.

In this case, I think the entire church was frightened that anyone in their midst would try to pull something over on God. I also think that sudden death made them realize that HOLINESS was expected within the congregation. They had a responsibility to live right with each other and with honesty and integrity toward God. So, in verse 6, they quickly remove the contagion by removing the body.

That the comparison with Achan’s sin in Joshua is a proper interpretation can be seen by what happens in the passage from verses 12-16. Signs and wonders are accomplished in the name of Jesus that by verse 17, the religious judges put the apostles on trial again. Let’s think about the signs and wonders for a moment, though. Signs and wonders were demonstrations of God’s incredible power. What happened after Achan and his family were put to death? The army of Israel won a victory where they had faced a humiliating defeat not long before. So, the effective church like the effective army of Israel in Joshua’s day, needed to be holy. “Just as Achan brought the leaven of deception into the old Israel, so Ananias and Sapphira were about to infect the new Israel with the same disease.” [Smith, p. 42.]

Now, some have tried to explain away this quick and private burial by stating that they didn’t have proper embalming materials and, it probably being a hot day in Jerusalem, they needed to get rid of the decomposing corpse in a hurry. While that’s possible, we see many occasions in the Bible where the burial procession was at least a day after the death (the widow’s son in the gospels) or there was a protracted viewing (Dorcas in Acts 9:37). I believe that the quick removal and burial was for two purposes: 1) to make sure that there was not undue mourning over someone who had died under God’s judgment; and 2) to get the physical reminder of “rebellion” or “sin” out of the church as fast as possible.

But sin is rarely accomplished in a vacuum and this conspiracy to defraud God wasn’t, either.

***7) And it came about three hours later that his wife, not knowing what took place, came in. 8) And Peter said to her, “Tell me if this is what you sold the land for.” And she said, “Yes, this much.” 9) So Peter said to her, “Why did you agree to test [with an idea toward failing] the Holy Spirit? See for yourself [check it out / behold], the feet of those who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” 10) So, she fell down at his feet and expired. And the young men came in, saw she was dead, and, carrying her, buried her alongside her husband. 11) And there came a GREAT FEAR upon all the church, and upon all who heard these things.* [PJT]**

Verse 7 tells us that three hours passed. We don’t know where Sapphira was during that time. Perhaps, she was off doing business as usual and surprised when her husband didn’t come home at the usual time. Maybe, she was waiting at home for Ananias to come home and tell her about the incredible accolades they had earned with their “generosity,” the plaques the church was placing in their honor. “Perhaps she had not intended to come at all, but had grown alarmed at the delay in Ananias’ return. She may have come in fear that something had gone wrong, and that fear would be increased by her not seeing her husband in her quick glance around the company.” [Maclaren, p. 177.]

Eventually, she shows up looking for her husband. Isn’t it interesting that the time lapse is THREE hours—a divine interval that could have given her ample time to get right with God and confess what she had done. BUT NO! She keeps the conspiracy going in verse 8, so Peter reiterates the crime—not the crime of not giving enough to the church but the crime of lying against the Holy Spirit.

And when Peter says that the pallbearers are waiting for her, just as they carried out her husband, I don’t think Peter was invoking God’s vengeance or God’s judgment. I think he was telling her that he knew what was going to happen. It was PROPHECY, not a CURSE [Arrington, p. 57.]. The old Scottish Baptist agrees: “The judgment on Sapphira was not inflicted by Peter. He foretold it by his prophetic power, but it was the hand of God which vindicated the purity of the infant Church.” [Maclaren, p. 177.]

My personal experience in this regard rings true because there have been a few times in my life when I had a direct word from the Lord and I desperately wanted my hearers to go a different direction. “Carl,” I once said (I’ve changed the name—even though no one hearing this would know the person of which I speak.), “if you do this, you’ll lose your wife and family.” He did it anyway and the last I heard, his wife was having an affair and his children weren’t sure who to call, “Daddy.”

Sapphira, like Ananias, could (in my opinion) have confessed, could have repented, could have been forgiven, but they died in rebellion. And the result? In verse 11, the result was the same as in verse 5—GREAT FEAR. I believe the early church had GREAT POWER and GREAT GRACE because God was so present, so visible in their midst that there was GREAT FEAR with regard to disobeying Him. “The fear which fell upon the whole community suggests that many a member of it had reason to tremble and say to himself, ‘There, but for the grace of God, go I.’” [Bruce, p. 115.]

Now, verse 15 may place an interesting, semi-superstitious emphasis on Peter’s shadow, but in verse 12, we are told that signs and wonders were performed by means of the hands of all of the apostles. Remember, this is an answer to part of the congregation’s prayer request in Acts 4:30 [Marshall, p. 114.] Now, even though the word for signs that is used in the Greek, σημε͡iα (pronounced “say-MEHEE-ah” or “see-MEE-ah”), is the one from which we get the English word “semiotics,” the idea of meaning, the idea here is that these miracles were all designed to point to something greater than themselves—Jesus. Also used here is the Greek word used for wonders, τέρατα (pronounced “TEH-rah-tah”), conveys the idea of something that seems amazing or impossible. It was used for the acts of jugglers and illusionists with an emphasis on the “strange” or “marvelous,” but sometimes merely in the sense of something beyond easy explanation.

So, when we hear of “signs and wonders” performed at the hands of the apostles, we know that these were not easily explicable or ignored phenomena. These were experiences that provided evidence beyond the normal pale of human experience. They were experiences and demonstrations that validated the preaching of these same apostles—preaching that pointed directly toward Jesus, the crucified and risen Savior. “By miraculous deeds, Christ confirmed the words of his witnesses. Miracles were manifestations of the Spirit’s power promised to the disciples (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8) and validations of their message.” [Arrington, p. 61.] Indeed, it sounds very like the beginnings of Jesus’ ministry as recorded in Mark 1:32-34 [Bruce, p. 119.].

As a result, this verse reminds me of the late Manley Beasley’s teaching on faith. He once wrote in his *Faith Workbook*, “When you become explainable, you cease to be Christian.” In other words, there ought to be inexplicable things happening about us when God is dwelling within us.

You’ve probably heard the bad elementary school joke about a Honda automobile appearing in the Bible. Someone makes the claim and then quotes from the King James Version of Acts 5:12 where all of the believers were in one “Accord.” You’d probably understand what the verse really means if I pronounce the Greek word for this (̔̔ομοθυμαδ̀̀ὸν) as “oh-moh-thee-mah-THOHN” you might hear the “homo” prefix that means “the same” and a part of the word that sounds like the English word “theme.” It actually means “desires.” So, they were in “one accord” (KJV), they had the same desires, objectives, and agenda—even as they met regularly at Solomon’s Portico. This word, with its root idea of the same desires, is used 10 times in the Book of Acts (1:14; 2:46; 4:12, 24; 7:57; 8:6; 12:20; 15:25; 18:21; and 19:29) [Robertson, p. 61.] . Most of the time it is about God’s people being united in what God wanted them to do, but sometimes, it is about the enemies of God being united in what they wanted to do to God’s people. Regardless, it reminds us of the power of unity.

But there are some people who just don’t want to be associated a bunch of fanatics or they don’t want to take the risk of being persecuted if things go wrong. Just observe in verse 13 that there were a bunch of folks who seem to be hanging around on the fringes. They don’t want to join—even though they held this group of believers in “high regard” (“esteemed them highly”—KJV, “held them in high honor”—RSV). Peterson’s “The Message” words it well, “But even though people admired them a lot, outsiders were wary about joining them.”

Some scholars have tried to transform the vowel in the word for “joining” from a short “o” sound to a long “o” sound. Then, they can say that people were afraid to interrupt the group or afraid to disturb the group. But this verb is the one that was often used in the classical world for piecing tile together in a tight inlaid pattern. I truly believe it was clear that while the general populace approved of what the early church was doing—the healing, the charity, and the like—they didn’t really want to become inlaid in the mosaic that the Holy Spirit was creating. It seems to me that they are keeping a safe distance from the church while still being interested, but trying to stay out of the trouble that they must have seen brewing from the religious leaders [Arrington, p. 61.].

And even today, when the church is what it is supposed to be, people have trouble figuring it out. They approve of our charitable ministries and our disaster efforts, but they don’t want to be locked into a covenant relationship with us. They don’t want to be tied down to Bible-based principles and they don’t want their freedom sacrificed—even when that sacrifice might demonstrate love in its truest sense.

They had that back-row mentality, the “I’ll come to see a movie or a concert or put my kids in Bible School, or send them to church camp, but don’t expect me to be involved myself” approach to church. But in spite of all the folks that hung around Solomon’s Portico for curiosity’s sake, to see what was going to happen next, verse 14 tells us that not everyone was afraid to join. Multitudes were becoming involved and one of the classic barriers of all history was tumbling down. Both men AND women were joining the church. Both men AND women were trusting in Jesus. Both men AND women were expecting God to be at work.

But in our passage, there are lots of people who want to get in Peter’s shadow. Superstitiously, they believed that just being in his shadow would heal them. And the passage itself doesn’t say that anyone in Peter’s shadow would actually be healed, but since the next verse (16) says, at least in many manuscripts, that every sick person brought to the apostles was healed and every possessed person brought for deliverance was delivered, it might have occurred so.

Even so, I insist that it was not Peter’s shadow that healed them anymore than it was the handkerchiefs in Acts 19:12 that healed. It was the proximity of holy men filled up with the power of God, indwelt with the presence of the Holy Spirit and totally expectant of the Holy Spirit to accomplish impossible deeds for God. By the way, when I lived in Georgia, I got a prayer handkerchief in the mail. It was a fundraising approach by an interdenominational group and it cited Acts 19 as its affirmation. They missed the point! Even as the people snuggling together under Peter’s shadow missed the point. The power—the healing, freeing, life-giving power comes from God—not from physical manifestations. If I’m confessed up, cleansed, forgiven, and fully cooperating with God’s Holy Spirit, my prayer for your healing or deliverance is every bit as powerful whether or not you’ve ever been touched by my shadow or given a piece of cloth that once touched me. The power is God’s. And if I’m not affecting my world and you’re not affecting your world like Peter and Paul did, it isn’t your shadow’s fault. It’s that we aren’t allowing God to flow through us totally and completely—no holds barred—no reservations—no hesitations.

Oh, I’m sure there were people who shivered and got goose bumps from proximity to Peter. Part of it might have been real and a lot of it might have been due to self-hypnosis. Frankly, it’s to be expected that people will be amazed, sometimes confused, and sometimes bewildered when God is at work. And if God is really accomplishing the unexpected in us, people will ascribe power to *us* instead of to *God*.

Still, verse 17 takes us into new territory. “Although Luke emphasizes divine deliverance, joy, and harmony among the first Christians, we are never far from persecution, incarceration, and courtroom defense. Almost a third of the narrative involves apostles in prison (4:3-31; 5:17-41; 6:12-7:60; 12:1-17; 16:22-40; 17:6-9, 19-33; 18:12-17; 21:30-28:31).” [Perkins, p. 242.] As I observed when teaching on Acts 4, whenever God is at work, the enemy is certain to react.

In this case, the enemy reaction is quite hostile. Verse 17 tells us that the religious leaders were filled with ζῆλος, pronounced either “ZEE-lohs” or “ZEH-loss.” If you pronounce those out loud, it won’t surprise you that this is the Greek word from which we get “zealous” in English. To be zealous can be either good or bad. Positively, it can mean that you have a lot of energy and determination to accomplish something. Negatively, it can connote the idea of self-righteous obsession or that of a person motivated by jealousy and envy. What do you think it was here? Believe it or not, it’s a word that really comes into its own in the hostility expressed toward the early church. We can see that because this word never appears in the three Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and only once in John [Arrington, p. 61, n1.].

Now, even though this seems similar to the episode in Acts 4, notice that “all” the apostles were arrested and thrown into prison. But all of the apostles were set free by an “angel of the Lord” in verse 19. This is the first time the “angel of the Lord,” and Old Testament terms for God accommodating Himself to earthly intervention. The “angel of the Lord” also appears in Acts 7:30, 38; 8:26; and 12:7-10, 23 [Smith, p. 45.]. The angel of the Lord commands them to go back to the temple and preach the words of life that they have been teaching. Then, Luke’s account turns comical, rather mocking regarding the ruling leaders who don’t even know what’s going on under their own authority.

“Luke obviously enjoyed the humour [U.K.] of the situation as the council sat waiting for their prisoners to be brought, quite unaware they were in the temple.” [Marshall, p. 116; Willimon, p. 56.] Not only that but the jailers reported that the cells were locked but the apostles couldn’t be found. And when they finally were discovered and brought to the council, it was without violence (v. 26) because the leaders were afraid of how the people would react if they interfered with these “wonder workers.”

But the real cause of their anxiety is shown in verse 28 when they refer to Jesus’ name as “this name” and Jesus Himself as “this man.” [Bruce, p. 121.] It is even more clear that they are all about self-interest because their concern is that the apostles’ preaching is accusing them of being responsible for this man’s blood. In other words, they know that they are being accused of being complicit in the death of Jesus. Of course, they are also upset because they thought they had revoked any authority the apostles might have had as teachers by ordering them not to teach. Yet, here they were teaching right in the center of what the ruling Jews felt should be their bailiwick.

Peter’s answer to their question is one that rings through the ages: God’s authority supersedes human authority (v. 29). The Greek tense indicates a moral necessity, “We MUST obey God rather [or better] than man.” The verb that is used is a compound word consisting of the word for “obey” and the noun for ruler (even the highest ruler) [Robertson, p. 65.] It is only used by Luke and Paul in the New Testament, very likely because they were constantly finding themselves up against authority. Some western texts have different wording, “Who should we obey? God or men?” [Bruce, p. 119, n27.] That would put the ball on the Sanhedrin’s side of the ping-pong table.

But either way, it is an accusation. “How does it sound in the ears of these religious officials to be reminded by this commoner that *they* are supposed to be obeying God also, rather than collaborating to keep a lid on the status quo of Jerusalem?” [Willimon, p. 57.] And, of course, Peter doesn’t stop there. After his appeal to God, he specifically says that they were complicit in crucifying Him BUT God had vindicated Him by exalting Him (vv. 30-31).

They didn’t heed Peter’s words and they didn’t repent. Instead, v. 33 tells us that they did what many people do when they are under conviction (the phrase here is “cut to the heart”), they wanted to kill the apostles. We might have had the first martyrdom a couple of chapters earlier if it hadn’t been for a rabbi named Gamaliel. We find out later that he was the young Paul’s tutor and Jewish sources indicate that he was a great rabbi. Here, he offers up the “wait and see” defense.

It is almost as if he is saying, “If these guys are the flavor of the month, their popularity will pass and you won’t have to do anything about them. Apparently, Luke puts words in his mouth because Theudas is an anachronism who doesn’t start his rebellion until after 44 AD, well after this speech [Munck, p. 51.]. However, Judas the Galilean was prior to this speech and Luke may have added Theudas in himself at a later period (or heard Gamaliel refer to Theudas in a different context with the same argument). Regardless, Gamaliel was saying that unless God was in their message, the movement represented by the apostles would fade away, and if God was in the message, they should be afraid to obstruct it.

There’s another consideration, as well. If they were to kill these men now, they would make martyrs, popular heroes out of them. So, Gamaliel is counseling them to wait. The death penalty is commuted, but the apostles are beaten, probably with the requisite 39 lashes (the traditional 40-1) [Bruce, p. 126.]

The last two verses make it clear that this isn’t going to stop them. They rejoice that they are worthy of suffering in THE NAME (v. 41). That wording has a two-fold purpose. In Judaism, THE NAME refers to Yahweh—God’s personal name. In this context, it is clear that THE NAME refers to Jesus, so the text is equating Jesus and God. Heresy to the Jews, it is gospel to you and me. And their action after suffering? Verse 42 tells us that they were sharing the good news (evangelizing) about Jesus Christ.