

Session #5: Acts Chapter 4:23-5:42

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Believers Pray for Boldness 4:23-31

This prayer of the apostles and the community provides us all with our model for reliance on God's help. They asked God to give them the strength they need to continue to proclaim the Word boldly and not be intimidated by persecution. The one thing that did NOT occur to them was to give in to the Sanhedrin's demand. They held to the conviction of their beliefs. And what were those beliefs:

- The conviction of the power of God. *If God is for us who can be against.* (Romans 8:31)
- The knowledge that humans rebelling against God will always fail.
- The belief in Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior.
- Experience in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This prayer includes some prophetic verses of Psalm 2 which find their fulfillment in Jesus

4:23 *went to their own people* We do not have enough information to understand whether St. Luke means the Apostles, the 120 from Acts:15 or even the 3,000 recently converted from Acts 2:41.

4:24 *they raised their voices to God in one accord* In other words they prayed with common belief and power. When we come to communal prayer such as in the Rosary or Liturgy of the Hours, or in our greatest prayer the Mass we too raise our voices in one accord to God because we should recognize that we are one body in Christ. *For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them* (Matthew 18:20)

4:27 *Herod* This is Herod Antipas who ruled Galilee and Peria. It was this Herod's father, Herod the Great that ruled during the birth of Christ and call for the massacre of the innocents. Herod Antipas was responsible for the death of John the Baptist and for the crucifixion of Jesus.

4:25-26 *Why did the Gentiles rage* In the middle of the communities prayers if a modified recitation of Psalm 2:1-2. When first written the psalmist ponders why other nations are plotting against God to destroy the King of Israel. This Psalm goes on to say that these plans are foolish because in the end God will always win. But here the early Christian community is understanding this Psalm as a prophecy about Jesus as the Messiah and that the Romans and the Jewish leadership are deceived in believing that they can thwart God's divine plan.

4:27 *whom you anointed* They are speaking here of Jesus being anointed by the Holy Spirit at His baptism in the Jordan. (Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22)

4:29 *speak your word with all boldness* In the midst of persecution what do you pray for? Unfortunately, all too many of us (including myself) pray for an end to the hardship that faces us rather than to pray for strength and boldness in the face of the difficulties. These early Christians in the midst of persecution are praying for courage so that they can continue the good fight and face their opposition with boldness.

4:30 stretch out your hand to heal

Knowing that those in prayer are modeling their voice after Psalm 2 it should be noted that in the Psalm the request of God is to: *break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.*(2:9). Here they are praying for God's compassion and mercy to be showered down upon the people. To bring them to faith through love rather than fear.

4:31 the place in which they were gathered together was shaken... the Holy Spirit chooses to demonstrate his presence visibly at times in order to encourage and remind people of His power. Scholars believe this is one of those moments. We see earthquakes used in the Old Testament in Exodus 19:18 and Isaiah 6:4. In this passage scholars believe it was meant to inspire the Apostles and Disciples to bold acts and strong preaching by knowing that God is there with them. In these beginning chapters of Acts we see these moments of God's wonders in physical and visible signs. Partly to confirm for those watching that God is with the Apostles and partly to strengthen and fortify the Christian community. These signs and wonders will disappear as we move further into the book of Acts.

filled with the Holy Spirit

The gift of the Holy Spirit is not a onetime deal. Each time we truly need the strength, wisdom, courage... of God and we pray to receive it, God can bestow it upon us again. Here the community has prayed in all fervor and recognizes renewal of the grace and encouragement of the Holy Spirit.

Believers share their Possessions 4:32-37

In this section we have a second summary (total of three) of the life of the first Christian community similar to what was outlined in Acts 2:42-47. What St. Luke focuses on here is the distribution of wealth and goods. Note two things: The early Church had an extremely sense of responsibility to one another since they would not let ANYONE be in need, therefore they shared what they had and sold what they held in excess so as to meet those needs. St. Luke also introduces Barnabas into his account. Barnabas will appear often later in Acts as friend and companion of St. Paul.

4:32 one heart and soul... The stress on the oneness of this community is important because it demonstrates the virtue of solidarity, of oneness in Christ and is one of the four marks of the Church. *The apostles bore witness to the resurrection not only by word but also by their virtues* (St. John Chrysostom in his homily on Acts.)

no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own

One of the things that gives witness to true belief is selfless concern for all. When we have complete trust in God we know that our needs will be taken care of. What we are seeing is the early Church living fitting the teachings of Jesus. SEE Luke 6:20-26.

4:34 not a needy person among them... This demonstrates that they had a strong and organized support and distribution system. This is the second time St. Luke points that the early Church found their power in the presence of God not in attachments to material things. Our



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call to charity is as much for those in need as it is to form our souls. The more we give away the more we receive in freedom and grace.

4:37 (Barnabas) ...sold a field ... To have mention Barnabas by name was a significant act and speaks of his future role in spreading the gospel. Who is Joseph Barnabas? Scholars believe that he was a Levite and a kinsman of Mark (the gospel writer). It is Barnabas who will introduce to the community a new convert, Paul (9:27), and we will hear of Barnabas again as companion and friend of St. Paul in his first mission trip (13:2). It is believed Barnabas was one of the first to preach the Good News of Jesus to his native island of Cyprus establishing Churches there and becoming their first Bishop. As we read on we will see that St. Luke is contrasting the good people of these early days against the bad which we will see in the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

Barnabas	Ananias and Sapphira
Barnabas gave truthfully and generously to the community from his sale of property.	Ananias and Sapphira conspired to defraud the community in lying about their gift of the sale of the land.
Barnabas' gift was an act of righteousness for which he received the gratitude of the community and a new name from the Apostles.	Ananias and Sapphira used their gift and their lie to seek status within the community.
Barnabas laid his donation to the community at the feet of the Apostles (Acts 4:37)	In the divine judgment of her sin Sapphira <i>fell down his feet</i> [Peter] <i>and breathed her last.</i>
Barnabas' righteousness came from both loving God and fear of offending God.	Ananias and Sapphira did not fear God in testing the Holy Spirit by lying.
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Ananias and Sapphira 5:1-11

What we here in this next section is a small testament to the idea that while most of the community functioned in harmony there were those problems as well. We read of Ananias and Sapphira whose greatest sin was not in holding back part of their wealth. What they possess is theirs to determine what they will do with. No, their deception is in pretending they are donating their entire wealth. They lied and in that they are punished. *What is done to the community is done to the Spirit of God.* New Collegeville Bible Commentary: Acts of the Apostles

5:3 Satan filled your heart The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was not in their holding back a part of the proceeds but in their deceit to the community. They lied making the Christian community believe that they were giving all of their wealth.

5:4 at your disposal What is given to God must be done voluntarily and freely. This couple was not obligated in any way to give of their wealth which remains true for you and me. Their sin is that

they plotted to deceive everyone within the early community. They lied in hopes of bolstering their image before the early Church. They were more concerned with their ego than the truth.

Have not lied to men but to God

Some theologians have proposed that the eighth sacrament is the Church for in the body of the true Church we receive the presence of God. Anyone who has been helped by the presence of the Church is experiencing God. So in this moment, as Ananias and Sapphira lie to the Church they are living in a lie to God. St. Ephrem says about this passage: *because they did not fear and sought to deceive those in whom dwelt the Holy Spirit who knows everything.*

5:5 breathed his last

We will later hear in verse 10 of this chapter that Sapphira will also die. Their deaths can be seen as the outward sign of their inward sin. We might consider this a very drastic move on the part of God. While St. Luke writes of their literal death yet we are to understand that all sin brings death into our lives – death of relationships, death of self respect and so on. All sin when we enter into it equals death.

5:10 she fell down at his feet and breathed her last

St. Luke is showing some irony in his writing in this verse. Sapphira falls at the feet of Peter in the same way that Barnabas *brought the money and put it at the feet of the apostles (4:37)*

5:11 And great fear came upon the whole Church

In this year of Mercy we are called to focus on the love, compassion and mercy of God which should be experienced through the Church. But we must also remember that our God is all powerful and that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is fear and wonder before the Lord. St. Paul reminds us of this in Philippians 2:12: *continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,*

The Apostles Heal Many 5:12-16

In these few short verses we have the third summation about the life in those early days of the Church. Here the focus is on the Apostles as the core and strength of the community and their ministry to heal the sick. We also learn three things: That the church met, where they met (Solomon's Portacol) and that the early Church was extremely effective.

5:12 many signs and wonders were done

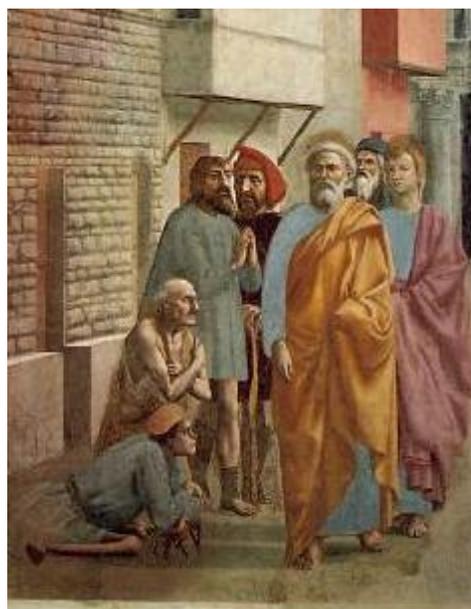
St.

Luke is borrowing from images and phrasing found in Exodus. In both we see that God is extremely powerful and present in the Church both in the Old Testament and now here in the New. This is the fourth mention of the signs and wonders the Apostles were able to perform in the name of Jesus. (Acts 2:19, 22: 4:30, 5:12)

5:13 none of the rest dared join them

St. Luke is

letting us know that the Apostles were loved and admired by those whose hearts were open, and feared by those who did



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not choose to have the eyes to see the power of God working through them.

5:14 men and women As was discussed in our study of the Gospel of St. Luke, scholars call his work the story of the women. St. Luke is not afraid to highlight the contributions of the women of this first century even though society at the time was highly patriarchal (only allowing the men to be understood as valid and powerful).

5:15 at least his shadow might fall on one or another We read in Luke 8:43-44 that merely by touching the tassels of Jesus prayer shawl the woman was healed. Here we have God's power being communicated through the shadow of St. Peter. The Apostles exhibited power over demons, death and disease. This was especially true of Peter who stands as the head of the Church. This should not be understood that Peter was more powerful than Jesus but to see that God's power will be communicated as God wills. These healings give testimony that the Kingdom of God has in fact begun to come into the world. Throughout the ages and to this present day the power of God flows through to bring about miraculous healings. These moments are only a foretaste of the full healing the world will know at the end of all time.

The Apostles are Persecuted 5:17-42

What we have in this section is the second action taken by the Sanhedrin against the Apostles. From ancient times there has only been one Temple and for the Jewish people this building, the Temple, is the throne of God here on earth. Through both his gospel and Acts St. Luke is showing that the truth of God is now coming from the throne of God. From Jesus as a boy teaching in the Temple (Luke 2:46) to Jesus as a man teaching, preaching and chasing evil from the Temple (Luke 19:45-21:38), and now the Apostles.

5:17-26

5:17 the high priest rose up This could have been either Annas, who was officially retired but still seen as a man of great authority (just as we would see a President who no longer controls the oval office i.e. Ford, Clinton...). This could have also been Caiaphas who was the ruling high priest of the Sanhedrin at this time.

filled with jealousy Three little words that get to the core of the matter. These men of the Sanhedrin were not as much concerned about the will of God as they were of being "upstaged" by these nobodies. The challenge in meditating on this verse is a call to our own self-examination when we find ourselves getting upset by something that is happening at Church or in faith. Is it because it is wrong or because it bruises our egos.

5:19 angel of the Lord opened the prison doors This is something we will see as an ongoing theme in Acts – Angelic intervention, instruction and assistance. (SEE Acts 8:26; 10:3-6; 12:7-10; 27:23-24)



5:20 *Go and take your place in the temple area* The message to them from God through the angels is not just to continue to preach but to do so in the Temple – in the middle of the enemy camp. The Apostles are being called to bring the truth back into the House of God.

5:21 *the council and the Senate of Israel* This would be the Sanhedrin, the high court of Judaism which is composed of the high priest and 70 leaders of Israel. Rome allowed this group to administer physical discipline among its member but not corporal punishment, not the death sentence.

5:27-32

5:28 *this man's blood upon us* This is one of those moments where individuals, because they were not a direct part of a decision made disassociate themselves from the result. The Sanhedrin is not only upset because the Apostles refuse to obey but that they would connect the death of Jesus with them when all they did was deliver Jesus to the Romans. Whether one intends something to happen or actually makes something happen there is guilt and sin.

5:29 *obey God rather than men* This is the basis of civil disobedience. The Church teaches that if what the civil law is asking is directly opposed to the teachings of God, we must obey God and not the civil authority. A big part of the call to justice that the Catholic Church actively participates in is to bring the civil law into harmony with God's law. Anti-abortion legislation is a perfect example in our present day.

5:30 *hanging on a tree* A reference to the crucifixion. The cross was made of wood. Wood comes from a tree. Of course they are talking about Jesus nailed to the cross.

5:33-42

5:34 *Gamaliel* We know from this verse several things about this man. First that he is a teacher who was influential in Jerusalem around 20-50AD. Later St. Paul will identify himself as a student of this great rabbi. We know he is great or at least well know because St. Luke identifies him by name. We also know that he comes from the philosophical/theological school of the Pharisees meaning, among other things, that Gamaliel believes in the resurrection of the body, of life after death. Finally, we know that Gamaliel is not only well known among the people but a man of power and substance with the Sanhedrin since he is able to stop the proceedings, have the Apostles removed so that he might talk privately to the council.

5:36 *Theudas* Theudas was a 1st Century AD Jewish rebel and self-proclaimed messiah who preached that he had the power of God. He convinced 400 people to gather their belongings and follow him to the Jordan where he proclaimed he would be able to part the sea. In the midst of his failed attempts Roman sent soldiers to stop this "uprising" killing many.

5:37 *Judas the Galilean* Another Jewish rebel who had amassed a number of followers. His end came when he led his followers in a revolt against the census called by Rome. This was the same census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. This Judas is seen by scholars as the father of the Zealot movement which failed to liberate Jerusalem from the Jewish war of 66-70AD.

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5:41 rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer In the sermon on the Mount Jesus taught: *Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* (Matthew 5:10-12) The Apostles and disciples are remembering this teaching of Jesus which gives cause for their happiness in the face of their difficulties.

5:42 they did not cease teaching and preaching One of the prayers we need to pray for ourselves is that we are made of stronger “stuff”. All too often one problem comes our way and we throw up our hands in defeat. *These early brethren are an example to Christians in every age: zeal to attract others to the faith is a characteristic of every true disciple of Jesus and the consequence of love of God and love for others: You have but little love if you are not zealous for the salvation of all souls. You have but poor love if you are not eager to inspire others...* St. Josemaria Escriva

Reflection Questions:

1. The story of Ananias and Sapphira seems not only unusual but severe. What do you think is the point of St. Luke including it? What does it have to teach us?
2. What are your thoughts on civil disobedience in the face of Catholic/Christian teaching? Do you believe there are some laws we are called not to obey?
3. The Apostles and disciples were brave men and women. Have you ever encountered opposition because of your religious beliefs? How did you handle it?

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The dogma of the Holy Trinity: 253-256

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