

Acts 4-5 Persecution, Generosity, and Controversy

Learning

Engaging Chapter 4-5 (some content you can use to prep and/or use as a group)

- **Recap:** Continue the first section of Acts (1:1-6:7) where **the Church is established in Jerusalem**
- **Scripture** - Prayer for Guidance, then read Acts 4:23-5:11 (4 minutes)
- **Context:** Bear in mind the broader themes of this first section as Luke gets close to wrapping it up. Also important in this passage is the parallels between Judas' demise and as well as some OT stories of disobedience with the story of Annanias and Sphira. Luke is trying to make sense of events within the entire arc of the God story showing continuity between the old and new covenants.
- **Interesting Words:** The phrase "their own" (v. 23) in Greek was usually used to refer to one's immediate family circle, but here Luke uses it to refer to the community of faith.
- **Culture:** It is important as modern readers to try and grasp the social context of the Christian community both then in the first century and now. Followers of Jesus have been in a position of "social exiles" from the beginning. Exiles first as Jews within a Roman occupied land and then second as a sect within the broader community of Judaism.
- **Themes:** In the center of these two stories, we have another summary statement from Luke describing the early community and again Generosity is at the heart of it. Luke is surely contrasting a posture of trust in God resulting in boldness and generosity, with lack of trust that leads to lying and deceit.
- **Quote for expanding the discussion:**

In these first chapters of Acts we read challenging stories of boldness, persecution, miracles, radical generosity, and the Fear of the Lord. Reflecting on these chapters, biblical scholar Justo Gonzalez writes "Much of what is often called 'biblical' is little more than a tendentious [or biased] interpretation, which lacks respect and obedience to the text. The text says what it says, no matter whether we like it or not. The function of the interpreter is not to take the sting out of the text, but to clarify it and bring it to bear on our situation."

Dialogue Questions (some example questions for this content above)

- How does the community of faith respond to their persecutions? How is their response similar and different from responses of the Jewish people under the old covenant? What stands out to you about their prayers? What is concerning them in response to opposition? What can we learn about prayer from this story?
- In Luke's summary statement, what are the core values he highlights?
- The story of Annanias and Sphira likely stirs deeper theological questions to our modern sensibilities. But let's try to sit in the text together and not miss what Luke is trying to say first. What stands out about this tragic story? What seems to be the core issue here? How does it contrast with the prior stories or the man named Barnabas?

Implication Questions (some example questions/challenges that engage real life now)

- Read the quote above and invite people to receive Justo's challenge to avoid the "sting" of certain texts.
- *Reflect* honestly on ways you respond to challenge, opposition, and difficulty. Share some of those pressures you feel and follow the example of prayer you discerned from this story in Acts.
- *Respond:* Luke has been clear that radical generosity is at the heart of what happens to a community that is caught up in the life of the Holy Spirit. Purehearted generosity requires a deep sense of trust in God and others. Here are two ways to participate and practice this spirit of Generosity.
 - (1) In your group ask for someone to share a need or desire that they have. Then invite the community to prayerfully contribute to support it. If nobody has one to share, is there someone outside your house church you could bless?
 - (2) Take a moment to pray and ask the Holy Spirit for a dollar amount of money you could give away this week. Then, wait for an opportunity to obey! It could be to a friend, a stranger, a generous tip, or something else creative. Come next week prepared to share about your experience.
- **During the Week:** Be reading Acts 1:1-6:7

Scriptures

The Believers Pray

23 On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. **24** When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. **25** You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? **26** The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.[b][c]

27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. **28** They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. **29** Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. **30** Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

31 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.

The Believers Share Their Possessions

32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. **33** With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all **34** that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales **35** and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), **37** sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Ananias and Sapphira

5 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. **2** With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? **4** Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. **6** Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. **8** Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

9 Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. **11** Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.