

Acts 1: Lesson One,

Pentecost and the Young Church at Jerusalem

Acts 1 – 5

Subject: Following Christ’s ascension, the Holy Spirit arrived and empowered the church to accomplish its mission.

Main Idea: Jesus told His disciples they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them.

Principles:

1. *Today, all believers receive the Holy Spirit at conversion.*
2. *The work of the Holy Spirit is to manifest God’s active presence in the world by empowering the Church for witness.*
3. *The Holy Spirit empowers believers with life and to overcome spiritual threats/opposition.*

Introduction

When I was young, “Mission Impossible” was a popular television show. Just like the more recent movies, in every episode, a small team was presented with a mission with national or worldwide implications and worked the impossible in order to accomplish it.

In one sense, the Book of Acts reads like a “Mission Impossible” episode. A handful of people were left with the seemingly impossible mission of reaching the entire world with a message most people did not want to believe. But just before Jesus ascended to Heaven, He promised them a secret weapon, a gift that would make all the difference. He promised that when the gift, the Holy Spirit, came on them, they would receive the power they needed to accomplish their mission of being His witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

If we miss the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we misunderstand all of Church history, not only the history of the young Jerusalem church, but all of Church history. The Holy Spirit is the agent that empowered a handful of people to accomplish an otherwise impossible mission. But when I say “agent,” we should not imagine some vague spiritual force or instrument, as some do when they think of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a *person*, a person of the divine Trinity. Each person of the Trinity has unique roles. The Holy Spirit empowers the Church to represent God in the world. Jesus is in Heaven, but the Holy Spirit is with us on earth, and it is only by His power that we can live the Christian life. It is only by His power that our life mission is possible.

I. Awaiting the Holy Spirit – Acts 1

A. Luke and Theophilus – 1:1 As a reminder, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were originally written by Luke as two volumes of one work. Both are addressed to Theophilus. The identities of Luke and Theophilus have already been addressed.

B. The Forty Days between Resurrection and Ascension– 1:2-5

- i. Forty Days: Jesus appeared to His disciples over the forty-day period between His resurrection and ascension. The time period of “forty days” has special biblical significance: the Flood of Noah’s day lasted forty days and nights (Genesis 7:12), Moses received the Law over a forty-day period (Exodus 24:18, 34:28), the Israelite spies explored the land for forty days (Numbers 13:25), Goliath taunted Israel’s army for forty days (1 Samuel 17:16), Elijah traveled for forty days and nights sustained by heavenly food (1 Kings 19:8), Jonah proclaimed Nineveh’s destruction would occur in forty days (Jonah 3:4), and Jesus’ fast and temptations lasted forty days.
- ii. Purpose: It appears that the forty-day delay in Jesus’ ascension served two purposes: Jesus instructed His disciples and He appeared to many eyewitnesses.
 1. *Instruction*: Jesus opened His disciples’ minds so they could understand what had been written about Him in the Scriptures (the Bible of their day included only the books of our Old Testament). Perhaps their enlightenment was akin to the “ah-hah” experience of believers today as we grasp how the Old and New Testaments compliment and explain one another. Two special instructions are highlighted by Luke: 1) Jesus commissioned His disciples as His witnesses and 2) He commanded them to remain in Jerusalem until the gift He promised them, the Holy Spirit, arrived (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:4, 8). “In a few days,” He said, “you will be *baptized with the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 1:5).
 2. *Eyewitnesses*: Luke tells us that Jesus presented Himself to His disciples and gave many convincing proofs He was alive. According to the Gospel writers, Jesus did not spend the forty days continuously with His disciples, but made random appearances. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul lists those to whom Jesus appeared during these forty days. Not only did He appear to His apostles and a few other individuals, on one occasion He appeared to over 500 of His followers at once. Two of the individuals Paul named, James (the half-brother of Jesus) and Paul, had not believed in Jesus prior to His post-resurrection appearance (John 7:5, Acts 9:1-20). So, Jesus gave sufficient and convincing proof that He had actually been bodily resurrected.

C. The Disciples Commissioned – 1:6-8

- i. Question Concerning the Kingdom: It is not surprising that when Jesus told His disciples they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days, the disciples asked, “Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel? (Acts 1:6). Old Testament prophecies often reference events surrounding the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ without acknowledging the valley of time that lay between the two. The Jews assumed that once Messiah came, all prophecies concerning Him would be fulfilled at once. Even though Jesus had instructed His disciples concerning Himself, they were still clearly ignorant about *times and dates* related to future events. Jesus’ response was that they weren’t to be concerned with discovering times and dates. Rather, they were to be concerned with what the Holy Spirit would empower them to do *at the present*: being His witnesses!
- ii. Carrying the Gospel to the “Ends of the Earth”: Just before returning to Heaven, Jesus reminded His disciples that they were to be His “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). As the Book of Acts unfolds, we discover that the Holy Spirit fulfilled this mission in the exact order Jesus foretold:
 1. Witnessing in Jerusalem: Acts 2:1 – 8:3
 2. Witnessing in Judea and Samaria: Acts 8:4 – Acts 12
 3. Witnessing to the end of the earth: Acts 13 – 28
 The Book of Acts ends abruptly with Paul under house arrest in Rome. It is almost as if Luke meant to tell us that the Holy Spirit’s work through the church in spreading the Gospel would be ongoing.
- iii. Power for Witness: Note that Jesus connected the power of the Holy Spirit with His disciple’s witness (1:8). Indeed, a major thrust of these early chapters of Acts is to show the effectiveness of the disciples’ witness following Pentecost. It was an immediate manifestation of the Holy Spirit’s presence and activity among them!

D. Jesus’ Ascension – 1:9-11: Luke offers no detail concerning Jesus’ ascension to Heaven, other than that He was “taken up” and “a cloud hid Him from their sight.” Two angels appeared and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into Heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into Heaven.” In one sense the words of the angels represent the thrilling hope of every believer, to see Jesus return. Christ’s return (the “parousia”) is a dominant theme of the New Testament. On the other hand, their words may have been a slight rebuke. The eyewitnesses could not hasten Jesus’ return by continuing to stand around staring into the sky. Jesus had given them a mission.

E. Between the Ascension and Pentecost – Acts 1:12-25

- i. The Group Who Waited: Peter is listed first among the apostles who awaited the Holy Spirit's arrival in an upstairs room in Jerusalem, together with a small group of the believing community. He was the first leader of what was about to become the church of Jerusalem. Jesus' mother Mary and his brothers were also present. According to Mark 6:3, Jesus had four half-brothers, James, Judas, Joseph, and Simon. Later in the Book of Acts, when Peter started traveling regularly outside Jerusalem, Jesus' oldest brother James became the leader of the Jerusalem church. According to tradition¹, Jesus' brother Judas later assumed that same position and authored the epistle known as "Jude." The women present may have included the wives of the apostles, as well as those who helped support Jesus during His ministry (Luke 8:2-3, 23:55, 24:10).
- ii. Activity While Waiting (1:14-25): The disciples occupied themselves with two worthwhile activities while awaiting the promised Holy Spirit.
 1. *Prayer*: First, "they all joined together constantly in prayer" (Acts 1:14). Prayer is critical to those who are waiting on God since it is through prayer that the Spirit of God works to align our thinking and desires with His will. It is also the means by which we plead effectively with God (He commands that we do so [Matthew 7:7-11, Luke 18:1-8]).
 2. *Consideration of the Scriptures*: Second, verses 15-16 indicate that Peter had been busily studying the Scriptures, eager to ensure that the group was fully aligned with God's will. He concluded that the prophecy of Psalm 109:8 ("may another take his place of leadership") applied to Judas and required action on their part.
 - a. *Judas' Death*: In 1:18-19, Luke interjects commentary about the death of Judas, saying he bought a field where he fell headlong; his body burst open and his intestines spilled out. According to Matthew 27:5, Judas hanged himself. The two accounts are far from irreconcilable. After Judas hanged himself, his body may have quickly become swollen until it burst and plummeted to the ground below, causing his intestines to spill out. It is also possible that he hanged himself over a cliff and the rope or branch broke.
 - b. *The Apostolic Office*
 - i. Peter said that Judas' replacement had to be an eyewitness who could confirm Jesus' resurrection and teachings. These were the primary roles of the apostles. Since they were with Jesus from the beginning, they were able to correct any possible misrepresentation of His teachings.

- ii. After two qualified men were nominated to take Judas' place, lots were cast (for the last time in the Scriptures) and Matthias was chosen as Judas' replacement. It is important to understand that he was not Judas' *successor*. The apostolic office was unique and without succession. However, since Judas was unworthy of the office, it was "necessary" (1:21) to *replace* him so that the number of apostles would be restored to twelve (representing the twelve tribes of Israel). The apostolic office ended with the deaths of the restored Twelve (note that James was not replaced after he was martyred [Acts 12:2]). Revelation 21:14 states the wall of the heavenly city has twelve foundations, named for the twelve apostles. These twelve were unique.
- c. *What about the "Apostle Paul"?* Some object to Peter's method of choosing Matthias and say that the Lord intended Paul to be the twelfth apostle. Paul is twice called an apostle in the book of Acts and he often referred to himself that way in his letters (Romans 1:1, 1 Corinthians 1:1, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Galatians 1:1, etc.). However, Paul is not the only man aside from the Twelve who is called an apostle in the New Testament. Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14), Jesus' brother James (Galatians 1:19), and Adronicus and Junias (Romans 16:7) are all called apostles. The word "apostle" means "sent one." It seems that Paul and these others were "apostles" in this general sense, while only the Twelve held the apostolic office. As we will discover, God nevertheless used Paul in a unique and powerful way.

Summary Statement: The disciples were told to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). They waited actively, spending time in prayer and searching the Scriptures. This should be a lesson for us when we are waiting for God to answer prayer and fulfill His promises. However, unlike these first disciples, believers today no longer wait to be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

The question of whether "baptism with the Holy Spirit" occurs at one's conversion or sometime after conversion has become a point of frequent debate since the rise of Pentecostalism in the early 1900's.

According to John 20:22, Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” *before* His ascension but then told them to *wait* in Jerusalem for the promised gift that would empower them for ministry. Since faith is the requirement for salvation, Jesus’ disciples were probably converted even before Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Perhaps Jesus was acting out a prophecy of what would occur later at Pentecost.ⁱⁱ The point is that disciples received the baptism of the Holy Spirit *after* their conversion. As it turns out, the Book of Acts (8:12-17, 19: 1-6) seems to indicate that the baptism with the Holy Spirit occurred after conversion on a couple of other occasions, as well.

The question is, “If the disciples were “born again” before Pentecost and were *later* baptized with the Holy Spirit, are we to conclude that this is the norm for Christians today?” Should we, upon conversion, begin seeking a second experience that will result in greater power for ministry and witness?

The New Testament only contains seven references to the baptism with (or in) the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:33, Acts 1:5, 11:16, 1 Corinthians 12:13). The first six all use virtually the identical Greek wording and indicate that Jesus is the one doing the baptizing and the Holy Spirit is the element (equivalent to water in physical baptism) – we are baptized by Jesus into the Holy Spirit. The verse in Corinthians has sometimes been translated differently in English, so that it appears that the Holy Spirit is the one doing the baptizing, not Jesus. This verse is often used to support the idea of a second experience. However, this conclusion cannot be supported from the Greek text, in which the phrase is virtually identical to the others. In fact, according to that very verse in Corinthians, *all* the Corinthians were baptized in the Holy Spirit *and became members of the body of Christ as a result*. Thus, “baptism in the Holy Spirit” must occur at the beginning of our Christian life.ⁱⁱⁱ

Although the disciples did have a “second experience” that occurred after their conversion, it was because they were living in a unique time in history, the period of transition between the work of the Holy Spirit under the Old Covenant and His work under the New Covenant. For this reason, many have referred to Pentecost as the “birthday” of the Church. Baptism with the Holy Spirit sometime after conversion is not a pattern for us today because we already live in the New Covenant age.

In succeeding lessons, the other instances in Acts in which individuals appear to have received the Holy Spirit after conversion will be explained. Next week, in Lesson 2, we will also consider exactly what occurs in the lives of believers today when they suddenly experience greater power for ministry and witness sometime after conversion.

Principle: *Today, all believers receive the Holy Spirit at conversion.*

Application: If you have repented of your sins and confessed that Jesus is your Savior and Lord, you have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, God’s amazing gift. When was the last time you thanked Him for sending His Spirit to indwell you? Has it been difficult for you, in the past, to think of the Holy Spirit as a unique person of the Trinity, and not just a vague force? In what ways have you recently experienced His work in your life and empowering for ministry?

Transition: Acts 1 ends with the disciples waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit in an upper room. Chapter 2 describes the Day of Pentecost.

II. Baptism with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – Acts 2

A. The Feast of Pentecost: During the concurrent Jewish Feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread, the Mosaic Law required an offering of firstfruits from the worshippers’ barley harvest. Seven weeks, or 50 days, after the firstfruits offering, the Feast of Weeks or Harvest, *also known as Pentecost*, began (Leviticus 23:4-17). “Pentecost” means “fifty.” The Jewish name for this celebration is *Shavuot*. Much later, after the Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, Jews began celebrating the giving of the Law at Pentecost. Even later, the anniversary of David’s death was also commemorated. In the Christian calendar, Pentecost is recognized as the day on which God gave His gift of the Holy Spirit. Over time, as it developed into a popular occasion for Christian baptisms, some traditions renamed it “Whitsunday” (White Sunday), due to the white attire worn by those being baptized. ^{iv}

B. Baptism with the Holy Spirit

- i. Timeline Leading to Pentecost: Considering that Pentecost falls fifty days after Passover, we can calculate how long the disciples must have waited in the upper room. Jesus was crucified at Passover (Matthew 26:2, 17; John 13:1, 18:28, 19:14) and rose from the dead on the third day (Matthew 16:21, 17:23, Acts 10:40). After that, He appeared to His disciples for forty days (Acts 1:3) before ascending to Heaven (Acts 1:9). This leaves roughly a week between the Ascension and Pentecost.
- ii. Witnesses to Pentecost: During the week they waited, the population of Jerusalem would have begun to swell. Jewish males were required to make three annual pilgrimages, two of which were for Passover and Pentecost. As a result, an unusually large number of Jews would have been present to witness the coming of the Holy Spirit on Jesus’ disciples. At least some (if not many) of those who were converted that day were pilgrims and would certainly have carried the Gospel back to their homelands. The Lord had perfectly timed the arrival of His Spirit.

- iii. Signs of Pentecost: Three signs accompanied the arrival of the Holy Spirit that day: the sound of a violent wind, what looked like tongues of fire, and the disciples speaking in foreign tongues (languages). Presumably, the Jews of the Diaspora (those dispersed in early times beyond the land of Israel) spoke the native languages of the areas in which they lived, for those in attendance recognized the “tongues” as their own domestic languages. Perhaps the disciples were supernaturally gifted to *speak* human languages they had never before spoken or perhaps those who gathered to listen were supernaturally enabled to *hear* what was being spoken in their own languages. The first two of these signs were never repeated and the third, speaking in tongues, was repeated on some (Acts 10:46, 19:6) *but not every* occasion when people were baptized with the Holy Spirit in Acts (8:14-17, 11:19-23).

C. Peter’s Speech – 2:14-36

- i. Peter’s Initiative: In Acts 1, Peter assumed leadership in replacing Judas. At Pentecost in Acts 2, the pattern of Peter’s leadership continues. He stood up together with the other Eleven, and acting as their spokesman, addressed the confused crowd (2:14).
- ii. Peter’s Defense: Some of those present assumed the disciples were drunk and made fun of them. Peter began by dismissing the charge as unreasonable; it was only nine in the morning.
- iii. Peter’s Explanation from Joel: Peter quoted from the Scriptures (Joel 2:28-32) to explain what the crowd was witnessing.
 1. The crowd was witnessing the outpouring of God’s Spirit. According to Peter’s application of Joel’s prophecy, this outpouring marked the beginning of the “last days.” Pentecost marked a transition in God’s timetable, and although over 2000 years have since passed, all events from that time forward have been marching toward an imminent conclusion.
 2. Secondly, God was no longer going to operate through a select group but His Spirit would henceforth be poured out on men and women, young and old, alike, so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” The remainder of Acts indicates that while those who received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost would have been (at least primarily) Jewish, God planned to pour out His Spirit on Gentiles as well.
 3. Third, Joel foretold a day in which those on whom God’s Spirit was poured out would prophesy. Prophesying refers to speaking under divine inspiration, *with or without* reference to the future and *with or without* speaking in tongues.

4. Scholars debate whether all of the events Peter recounted from the Book of Joel were fulfilled at Pentecost or only some of them, especially with regard to the heavenly signs mentioned in Acts 2:19-20. If Joel used apocalyptic (symbolic) language, the heavenly wonders might very well have been descriptions of the coming of the Holy Spirit. But if one takes the prophecy literally, then we must still be awaiting the fulfillment of these signs. In either case, Joel's prophecy indicates that these things would occur "before the coming of the great and glorious (dreadful) day of the Lord" (that is, Judgment Day [Acts 2:20]).
- iv. Peter's Emphasis on Jesus: Next, Peter explained that the reason the prophecy was being fulfilled was that God's Messiah Jesus had come. God had accredited Jesus through His miracles (2:22), and His resurrection was the ultimate proof (2:24-32). Peter explained that Jesus was now exalted at God's right hand in Heaven, where He was pouring out His Spirit, as they were witnessing (2:32-33). To substantiate these claims, Peter proved from the Scriptures that King David had foreseen Jesus' resurrection and proclaimed Jesus' divinity (2:25-32, 2:34-35). Thus, Peter focused his audience on Jesus, concluding that He is both Lord and Christ (2:36).
- v. Peter's Forthright Accusation: It is probable that some of the Jews attending the Pentecost celebration had also been in Jerusalem at Passover when Jesus was crucified. Peter claimed they were responsible for crucifying Jesus (2:23, 36). However, the accusation was also true of those who were not present. Each and every one of us is responsible for Jesus' death, since it was for our sins that He died. However, as Peter explained, our responsibility for Jesus' death does not negate God's sovereign control. All of this occurred according to God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge.

D. Response of the Crowd – Acts 2:37-47: Peter's speech was so powerful that the crowd was "cut to the heart" (2:37) and those who repented and were baptized totaled about 3000! Only a few weeks earlier, Peter had lacked the courage to admit that he belonged to Christ (John 18:15-27). But once Peter was baptized with the Holy Spirit, he became a powerfully effective witness: he was emboldened, he was able to recall and apply scripture, and the Holy Spirit gave him words that would cut to the hearts of those in his audience.

E. Progress Report – 2:42-47: Immediately after this account, at the end of chapter 2, Luke interjects the first of many “progress reports” on the state of the Church. In the weeks after Pentecost, the young, rapidly growing Jerusalem church was devoted to the apostles’ teaching, to prayer and worship, and to fellowshiping with and caring for one another. Here, we see that unity among believers is another manifestation of the work of the Holy Spirit. As a result, they enjoyed the favor of the non-believing community and many were daily added to their number. Their lifestyle was a powerful witness. Furthermore, the apostles performed many wonders and signs that awed the Church.

Summary Statement: The impact of the Holy Spirit’s coming was immediate: the impact on Peter, the impact on the Church, and the impact on all those who heard and observed their witness.

Principle: *The work of the Holy Spirit is to manifest God’s active presence in the world by empowering the Church for witness.*

In the Old Testament, the presence of God was indicated in theophanies, in special displays of His glory, and in the empowerment of certain people for special roles. While Jesus was on earth, He revealed the Father. But since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is primarily the member of the Trinity who manifests God’s presence.

Under the Old Covenant, God’s people were far less effective as witnesses to the nations around them. The Holy Spirit worked powerfully through a few individuals but not through all of God’s people (Numbers 11:29). In addition, those who had the Holy Spirit’s equipping could lose it (1 Samuel 16:14, Psalm 51:11). However, as the Joel prophecy quoted by Peter indicates, those under the Old Covenant anticipated a day when the Holy Spirit’s work would be much more powerful and widespread (Numbers 11:29, Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29). When Peter was baptized with the Holy Spirit, *God’s presence* was powerfully demonstrated *in and through* Him.

Application: Would others say that they experience a sense of God’s active presence when they are around you? Do you feel an urgency to tell others about Jesus or is it difficult for you to talk about Him? On what or whom do you depend for courage, the appropriate scripture passage, and an impactful application in your witness? The Holy Spirit is our power source for effective witness.

Transition: According to the geographical pattern for evangelism laid out in Acts 1:8, Jesus’ disciples were first to reach Jerusalem, their own city. Everything in chapters 3-5 takes place in Jerusalem. Chapters 3-5 also further illustrate the work and witness of the Holy Spirit. He gave the disciples power to perform miraculous signs and power to meet threats that came from without and within the Church.

III. **Work and Witness of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem** – Acts 3-5

A. **The Miraculous Healing of the Lame Beggar** – Acts 3

- i. The Jewishness of the Early Church: The first Christians were Jewish. They were not in the least conflicted between continuing the traditional practices that constituted the fabric of their cultural identity and following Jesus wholeheartedly. According to Acts 3:1, Peter and John maintained their custom of going to the Temple for prayer at three in the afternoon. As the Book of Acts will evidence, keeping Jewish traditions only became an issue in the Church after the Holy Spirit made it clear that Gentiles were to be included and that together, they formed one body.
- ii. The Healing – 3:1-10: Since Jesus was no longer physically present on earth, it was important to the formation of the Church that Jesus’ representatives would be identified by unbelievers as belonging to Him. Therefore, God granted special gifts of healing to the twelve apostles and others in the early church. This supernatural ability directly linked the apostles with the healing ministry of Jesus and authenticated their message. But these healings were also a sign of the greater spiritual healing and life that the Holy Spirit offers to all! As Peter and John approached the Temple, they saw a man who had been crippled since birth being carried to the Temple gate where he begged. Peter had no money, but he offered to give the man something that money could never buy, Jesus Christ and His healing. Peter helped the man to his feet and the man immediately jumped and praised God.
- iii. Peter’s Speech to The Witnesses – 3:11-26: An audience quickly gathered and Peter was given another opportunity to witness. Peter was quick to point those who witnessed it to Jesus. Chapters 3-5 are full of the phrase “the name of Jesus” or “Jesus’ name” and references to Jesus being exalted (3:6, 13, 16, 20, 26; 4:2, 7, 10, 12, 17-18; 5:28, 30-31, 40-41). Many elements of this second sermon are the same as those in the first. In both, Peter used prophecy to support his premises, accused his audience of their guilt for Jesus’ murder, exalted the risen Jesus, and exhorted those listening to repent and put their faith in Jesus.

B. The Apostles’ Meet Opposition – Acts 4: At the end of chapter 2, the Church was said to have found favor with all the people (2:47), but that did not last for long. Just as Jesus was often met with opposition in His early ministry, so too would His Church. Chapter 4 tells of the Church being threatened by Jewish religious leaders (see Introduction to the GOD of the WORD *Gospels* study for more information on 1st century Jewish religious sects); chapter 5 tells of a threat that came from within the Church.

i. Peter's Confrontation with the Religious Leaders – 4:1-21

1. *The Offended Sadducees* – 4:1-7: Luke tells us the Jewish religious leaders were more disturbed by the powerful teaching of the apostles concerning Jesus' resurrection than by the miracle itself (Acts 4:2). The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection. Annas, whom Luke calls the high priest (4:6), had actually held the office at an earlier time (from A.D. 6-15). However, Annas retained primary influence throughout the years in which his four sons succeeded him, explaining Luke's reference. These religious leaders had Peter and John imprisoned, but the impact of Peter's message could not be undone and the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand (4:4). The Holy Spirit was accomplishing the mission Jesus had given His disciples!
2. *Peter's Bold Defense* – 4:8-12: The next morning, Peter and John were brought before the elders and teachers of the Law and questioned. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter boldly addressed the group, laying on them the responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion, crediting Jesus for the healing, and declaring that salvation is found in no one other than Jesus.
3. *The Religious Leaders' Response*: Luke says the priests and Sadducees were shocked by the courage of these "unschooled, ordinary men," but "took note that [they] had been with Jesus" (4:13). Fearing the outcome of any harsher recourse, since the people were elated and praising God for the miracle, the rulers rather lamely ordered the apostles to stop speaking or teaching in Jesus' name.

i. Powerful Prayer Following Threats – 4:23-31

1. *The Believers' Prayer*: On their release, Peter and John reported all that had happened to the Church. The Holy Spirit had empowered Peter and John to meet this opposition and He also empowered the Church. The believers lifted their voices in prayer to God, acknowledging His sovereignty (4:24); affirming their understanding from Scripture, as well as their own recent history, that God's people should expect opposition (4:25-27); recognizing that even this evil is not outside God's power and will (4:28); and requesting boldness to stand in the face of opposition (4:29); and asking for healings, signs, and wonders that would glorify Jesus (4:30). What the religious leaders intended for evil, the Holy Spirit worked for good. The opposition did not weaken the Church but unified and strengthened it.

2. *God's Response*: Ironically, a miraculous healing was the very thing that had just brought trouble upon them. But the Church also saw the opportunity it gave Peter to testify of Jesus. They humbly and courageously prioritized the advancement of Christ's Kingdom ahead of their own self-interests and prayed accordingly. They did not ask God to remove their trials, only to give them courage to face them boldly and to glorify Himself through them. It's little wonder that God responded to such faith and courage with a tangible sign of His presence and shook the place where they were meeting! Then, their prayer for courage was immediately answered. They were "filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (4:31). Note that these individuals had already been *baptized* with the Holy Spirit, but on this occasion, they experienced a fresh *filling* that was accompanied (as it always is) with renewed power.
- ii. Second Progress Report – 4:32-35: At the end of chapter 4, Luke provides another commentary, indicating that God's grace was powerfully at work so that the Church exhibited love for one another through acts of generosity. This introduces the next illustration of the Holy Spirit's work as the Church faced a threat from within.

C. Ananias and Sapphira Instantly Judged – Acts 4:36 – 5:11

- i. Ananias and Sapphira's Deception: In 4:36-37, Luke introduces Barnabas, seemingly to contrast his good-willed generosity with the deception of a couple named Ananias and Sapphira. Later in Acts, Barnabas is shown to have played an important role in the early Church. Like Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira sold land. Barnabas gave the money to the apostles for the benefit of believers in need. Ananias and Sapphira also brought proceeds to the apostles. The full amount of money for which Ananias and Sapphira sold the land was at their disposal (they could have done anything they pleased with it [5:4]). However, Peter accused the couple of lying to God. Apparently, they lied about how much the land actually cost, pretending to offer all the proceeds when what they offered was actually only part of the total.
- ii. Ananias and Sapphira's Sudden Judgment
 1. *Immediate Death*: God immediately claimed the lives of Ananias and Sapphira. Luke does not indicate whether Ananias and Sapphira were true believers who succumbed to temptation or false believers who joined the Church for some personal advantage. He only says they lied to the Holy Spirit at Satan's prompting (5:3) and in so doing, tested the Spirit of the Lord (5:9).

2. *Impact on the Community*: The effect of their deaths on the community is emphasized in a third progress report: “No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (5:13-14). Luke probably meant that anyone who might have considered joining the group of believers insincerely was afraid to do so, but many more came to sincere faith out of awe and respect for God’s power.
3. *Impact on the Church*: 5:11 says great fear seized the whole Church. The fragile, new body of believers needed to understand that they could not continue experiencing the Holy Spirit’s power and grieve Him at the same time. In this instance, God’s judgment was more immediate than we often experience today. Perhaps we can assume that, since God’s plan was to use this relatively small (and thus, vulnerable) group of people to reach the entire world, it was critical to immediately purge them of anything that could promote decay and snuff out their witness. When it comes to malice, a little “yeast” leavens the whole batch of dough (Luke 12:1, 1 Corinthians 5:6-7).

D. The Religious Leaders Opposition Intensifies – Acts 5:17-42

- i. The Apostles’ Arrest and Miraculous Deliverance: Ananias and Sapphira posed a threat from within the Church, but even with that threat eliminated, threats from the outside continued. The numerical growth, popularity, and miraculous power experienced by the Church made the Jewish religious authorities jealous (5:17) and defensive (5:28). They arrested all of the apostles (5:18), but an angel miraculously released and re-commissioned them, saying, “Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life” (5:19 -20). *The Holy Spirit was proving His power over spiritual opposition.*
- ii. Peter’s Defense: When the high priest and Sadducees realized the apostles were no longer in prison, even though the prison doors had remained locked, they sent guards to bring the apostles before the 71-member Jewish ruling council, known as the Sanhedrin. Peter delivered a short speech (5:29-32), emphasizing that Jesus was resurrected and exalted by God, the Sanhedrin’s guilt in His death, and their need for repentance. He also explained that as witnesses to Jesus’ teachings and resurrection, they had no choice but to testify of these things in obedience to God, even though it meant disobeying the orders of the high priest.

- iii. The Sanhedrin's Response: The religious leaders were infuriated. The implication of Peter's statement was clear: if the apostles were operating under God's direction and these members of the Sanhedrin opposed them, the high priest could not be God's representative! Gamaliel, a respected teacher among them, convinced the group not to interfere: "If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God" (5:38-39). There is wisdom in Gamaliel's words. It is possible to be good-intentioned and yet end up fighting God and His purposes if we ignore what we see Him doing around us. Later, the neutral position of Gamaliel and the Sanhedrin changed as they began to recognize the Church's emphasis on Jesus' Messiahship and Lordship as a threat of Jewish apostasy.^v Acts 22:3 tells us that Gamaliel trained Paul (22:3), formerly Saul, who actively persecuted the church. For the time being however, the high priest had the apostles flogged and ordered them again to not speak in Jesus' name.
- iv. Joy in Suffering: The apostles left rejoicing that they were counted worthy of suffering disgrace for Jesus' name. Only the indwelling Holy Spirit can enable such a response. They never stopped proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah both in public and in private, day after day.

Summary Statement: We have already noted that the Holy Spirit manifests God's presence in the world by empowering His people *for witness*. In Acts 3-5, we learn that the Holy Spirit also empowers believers with *life* and to *overcome spiritual threats or opposition*.

Principle: *The Holy Spirit empowers believers with life and to overcome spiritual threats/opposition.*

Application: In Acts 3, the lame beggar was healed by the Spirit's life-giving power. Such miracles authenticated the witness of the early Church, and miracles of healing, like this one, authenticated their witness specifically to the life-giving power of Christ. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10). We receive this life by His Spirit.

The second verse of the Bible attests to the Holy Spirit's life-giving involvement in Creation (Genesis 1:2). Psalm 104:30 echoes, "When you send forth your Spirit, they are created." This is also true in the spiritual realm. The Holy Spirit regenerates. Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be "born of the Spirit" (John 3:6-7). The apostles' healings attested to the Holy Spirit's life-giving power. Like the lame beggar, we were once powerless to help ourselves. Spiritually, we were lifeless. But when we receive Jesus, we are born anew through His Spirit into life. Is there evidence of this new life within you? Are others drawn to you? Would the people you live with say that you exude the fragrance of life or the stench of death?

Then, in Acts 4-5, the Holy Spirit empowered the Church to overcome spiritual threats from without and within. Sometimes, this opposition presents itself outwardly in opposition to the preaching of the Gospel. Other times, the spiritual battles are inward. What kinds of battles are you facing? Are you attempting to fight in your own strength or by the power of the Holy Spirit?

Conclusion

This is a good week for us to ask ourselves such questions and to consider whether we are experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In our next lesson, we will meet Stephen, who, like Peter, was filled with the Holy Spirit. We will discover what can prevent us from experiencing His power and what we need to do when that happens.

We cannot live the Christian life apart from the indwelling Holy Spirit. We cannot fulfill our mission of representing God and reaching the ends of the earth with the Gospel. On our own, it is “mission impossible.” But by the Holy Spirit, we are empowered for witness, for life, and for overcoming opposition.

ⁱ Polhill, J. B. (2001). *Vol. 26: Acts* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (89). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

ⁱⁱ Grudem, Wayne (2000). *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (footnote, p. 769). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stott, John R. (1964, 1972). *The Baptism and Fullness of the Holy Spirit* (p. 23). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Fellowship.

^{iv} Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (1639–1640). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

^v Longenecker, Richard N. (1994). *The Acts of the Apostles: Expositor's Bible Commentary, Abridged* (p. 412). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.