

## **The Continuing Acts of Jesus: Don't go and make Disciples... until...**

Acts 5:12-21

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Grab the Bible from the pew in front of you and open to Acts chapter 5. Today our text has two sections to it. And both these sections emphasize how the power of God, at work in the people of God, brings glory to God.

If you've been with us for the last couple months this shouldn't surprise you. Luke has been on about this now for five chapters, and he is going to continue with this agenda for the rest of the book. And that's because the last words that Jesus left us with were:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Jesus said when His Spirit falls on people He fills them with power. But He doesn't do this for fun, or to make us impressive. He does this so that we will be His witnesses.

Now a witness is someone who talks about what they've seen. They are usually an unbiased observer. So when I was 16 and was coming down Foothills and turning left on North Nechako on a green light instead of a green arrow. And some other unsuspecting driver was heading up Foot Hills, our two cars collided in the intersection, all the witnesses agreed it was all my fault. And so not only did I suffer the wrath of my parents, but I got a ticket when the police showed up. The witnesses foiled my attempts to blame anything on the other guy.

And similarly in chapter 4 when Peter and John were hauled before the court and commanded not to speak in "that name" anymore they responded: "We can't help speaking about what we have seen and heard."<sup>1</sup> "We are witnesses."

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Now here is the pivotal point for us to get today. You can't be a witness to something you haven't experienced. The courts aren't going to summon you as a witness if your friend's cousin told him to tell you that they saw me turn left on a green light – you weren't even there! You would just be speculating.

And it's the same thing with being Jesus' witness. You can't be a witness of Jesus if you've just heard that he did some stuff in someone else's life. That's not a testimony. And that's not what following Jesus is about. You can only be a witness if you've experienced something yourself.

And that's why Jesus tells His disciples that they are going to receive power when the Spirit falls on them, and it would be this power that would turn them into His witnesses.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 4:20

In fact, just before Acts 1:8 where Jesus commissions His disciples to go out in power and be His witnesses He gives them the great anti-commission. So in Acts 1:4 He said:  
 Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised,  
 which you have heard Me speak about. For John baptized  
 with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.  
 (Acts 1:4-5)

“Don’t go, and don’t do anything. Don’t try to be My witness until I’ve put My Holy Spirit in you. You won’t have any power. You will just be telling people about stuff you saw someone else do. Wait until you’ve experienced the Spirit yourself. Then you will be My witnesses.” Our text picks this theme up today.

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Now something else we’ve been doing in this series is hearing our people witness to the fact that God is at work right now. And so I’d like to call Karen up to tell us about seeing the Spirit’s power move in her life.

[Karen]

Once you have witnessed God first hand, then you can tell people about what you have seen. Now here’s the reality, if Jesus is in your heart then you have experienced a miracle. I’m going to ask you a couple questions here and I need your response: How many of you are saved? How many of you have been saved from something? Maybe you’ve been delivered from an addiction or a sin you were trapped in. Perhaps it was a fear or identity problem. Has anyone here been saved from anything like this? Let me put it this way: Is life better for you now that you are serving Jesus?

Now saying “amen” to any of these things doesn’t mean you are perfect. Last week we talked about how nobody here has arrived at looking like Jesus yet – that won’t happen until glory. But when we talk about having God work in our lives the devil often shoots back “Come on, you don’t have a testimony. God hasn’t really done anything in you. You aren’t really delivered. Look you are still a sinner.”

And the thing that makes lies like these powerful is that there is a shred of truth to them. Yes, there is still a war against sin raging within my body. And I’m not perfect. But that’s not the point. The point is have I seen God doing something in my life? And am I looking for Him to keep doing something in my life?

How many of you want God to do something powerful in and through your life?  
 How many of you believe God wants to do something powerful in and through your life?

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He does. This was true in the first century, and it is just as true today. So let’s look at Acts 5 starting in verse 12.

[Read Acts 5:12-16]

Wow! That's incredible. This is God's answer to the prayer Peter, John and the church prayed after they were threatened not to speak in the name of Jesus anymore. They prayed:

Sovereign Lord... You made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them... Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable Your servants to speak Your word with great boldness. Stretch out Your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of Your holy servant Jesus. (Acts 4:24-30)

And after they prayed, the house they were meeting in was shaken, and the Holy Spirit filled them again and they started seeing God answer their prayers. They were filled with boldness not just to live as nice people next to their neighbours, but to speak God's controversial word into their lives. And God opened their eyes and allowed them to participate with Him in the working of many miracles.

And the first thing I want to look at today is this desire for God to show up and perform signs and wonders.

And I want to case this in a critique that I have heard before, and perhaps you have as well. And that is that we shouldn't spend our energy seeking signs and wonders. And that's because they aren't the main thing. Sure it is nice if God does some miracles, but really what we need is to get into the word. If we don't experience the miraculous that's okay. It's not essential. It is just the icing on the cake.

And people who advocate for a "wonderless" Christianity site verses like 1 Corinthians 1 where Paul writes:

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:22-23)

Preaching the word is what is important. Another time the Pharisees asked Jesus to perform a sign as evidence that He had authority He claimed and we read:

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. (Matthew 12:39)

So how do we hold texts that seem to deny the importance of signs, or even stress the sinfulness of seeking signs, together with the early church's desire to see God move in power and His affirmative response?

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Well the big thing here is to realize that both with Jesus and Paul the people who were seeking signs weren't looking to believe in Jesus, they were looking to mock Him.

So in Matthew 12 the Pharisees weren't coming to Jesus hungry to see the power of God move through Him. They were sceptics who were refusing to admit that God was working even when the miraculous was happening all around them.

And Paul makes the same point when he talks about the Jews and Greeks. Both these bodies of people weren't seeking an encounter with Jesus, they were looking for fuel to fire up their refusal to accept Him.

And God never removes the need for faith from people. Think about it, Jesus could have very easily proved to everyone that He was God with skin on 2000 years ago. He could have singlehandedly taken on the Romans. He could have ripped Caesar from his throne and made him bow before Him. All this was well within His grasp. But instead the miracles He chose to do were done in such a way that people were able to miss them.

Remember, even after spending three years with Jesus the disciples themselves still doubted and denied Him. It was only after His death and resurrection, and then ultimately their being filled with His Spirit that things changed. This is when these very fearful and normal people became Jesus' witnesses.

So miracles aren't proofs that remove the doubt from sceptics. God refuses to force us to believe. But miracles do birth faith in the hearts of seekers. And this is why the disciple pray for God to do the miraculous. They pray for God to stretch out His hand and perform signs and wonders in the name of Jesus because faith in Christ is not just about knowing some right doctrine, it is about a relationship with the living God.

And friends, this is what your neighbours and family members need too. They don't need religion. They don't need to become good people and live their lives by Christian rules. They don't need to show up in church wearing their Sunday best. What they need is an encounter with the living God.

And the Apostles knew this is what people needed. They knew people needed more than doctrine, they needed new life, and that's why they prayed for God to show up.

And they also prayed this way because there was nothing they could do to make the miraculous happen. Miracles only happen when God does them – right? And so they prayed "God stretch out Your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of Your holy servant Jesus." And in our text today God started doing it.

The Apostles were empowered to perform many signs and wonders. Even Peter's shadow started healing people – I love that! And demons were getting cast out. And people were coming to faith. The Apostles were bearing witness to the power of God. And crowds of people in turn were becoming witnesses to God's power.

And then in the middle of this we get two verses that at first seem to contradict – verses 13 and 14.

Now these verses are describing two results of this incredible move of God.

So first, the people of Jerusalem – that would be observers of what was happening in the church, not the people inside – were standing in awe. Luke says “No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.”

Remember chapter 5 starts with Ananias and Sapphira – it’s not a happy story. So the people understood they couldn’t just jump into following Jesus without counting the cost. Nobody was watering down the Gospel to boost numbers. If people got in under the wrong pretext then God was striking them dead! So people were being careful. Now the church was highly regarded, people couldn’t say anything about it, but lots of people were saying “I think the cost is too great, I’m not in.”

Yet the very next verse says ‘Nevertheless multitudes of men and women were streaming into the church and pledging their lives to follow Jesus.’ Other people were counting the cost and realizing that the precious opportunity to encounter the living God was worth any risk.

Friends, they weren’t coming to God because the Four Spiritual Laws made sense of their situation, they were coming to God because God was there!

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Now it isn’t an accident that Luke has recorded the story like this. He has an agenda. Luke wants us to see that when the Spirit comes on you in power you become a witness for Jesus. And that is what is going on here.

The church prays “God, make Your name great. Stretch out Your hand to heal people and do signs and wonders. Draw people to Your Son. Make the name of Jesus great.” And God does.

So let me ask a couple more questions. And feel free to respond to these questions – they aren’t just rhetorical. Do you have God’s Spirit inside you? You aren’t perfect yet, but has He been working to conform you more and more to the image of Christ? As you look back over your life have you seen this happen? That’s the first half of the questions. Here are the ones that follow: Are there people in your neighbourhood and in your family who could use their lives being transformed by the power of God? Do these people need more than just to learn and believe some right doctrine? Do they need to encounter God? Has God put you in their lives?

If the answer to those questions is “yes”, and you don’t have the power to do the miraculous yourself – as I sure don’t – then we need to pray, like the early church, that God will pour out His Spirit and come in power into our lives and the lives of those He has put us beside.

Friends, God is the one who draws people to Himself. And He does that miracle through us when His Spirit empowers us to partner with Him in what He is doing. So pray that God will stretch out His hand to heal and do signs and wonders so that the people in your life might encounter the living God.

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I want to switch gears now and look at the second part of our text this morning. So let's keep reading starting in verse 17.

[Read Acts 5:17-21]

So the Apostles are in tune with what God is doing. They are seeing Him move and participating powerfully in what He is doing, and then serious conflict arises. Operating in spiritual power has a price. And that price is suffering.

Now suffering takes many forms, and here it takes the form of imprisonment inspired by jealousy. This is what Luke tells us the Sadducees are filled with in verse 17.

Now jealousy is a little bit of an interesting problem. The roots of jealousy comes from seeing something desirable in someone else that we don't possess ourselves. But this isn't bad by itself. Wanting what someone else has isn't sin. So Paul tells the church:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. (1 Corinthians 12:27-31)

Paul says God gives all sorts of gifts to His church – we don't all get the same thing. And then he says we are supposed to desire the greater gifts. So seeing something desirable in someone else that you would like is not sin, it is not jealousy.

Jealousy happens when seeing what someone else has stirs up feelings of anger, resentment and competition in you. So you wish you had more of what they have than they do. Or you wish they had less of what they have so they didn't look better than you. This is what the Sadducees were suffering from.

And jealousy has two causes. First it is caused by a lack of love. If you love someone then you will rejoice when God gives them a particular gift, even if He hasn't given the same gift to you. So just a few verses later in Corinthians Paul tells the church:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud. (1 Corinthians 13:4)

Jealousy comes from a lack of love.

But second jealousy is also caused by a lack of faith. Since God is the giver of gifts, when we question the way He gives out His power we aren't trusting in His sovereignty. God knows what He is doing. His gift giving isn't random, He has a plan. So, while we can desire and ask Him to give us gifts, we must not be resentful if He doesn't.

So I believe in the gift of tongues. Paul describes this as a gift of self-edification for encouraging your faith,<sup>2</sup> and I think it would be awesome to have this! And I've asked for it. And people have prayed for me. And I still ask for it from time to time. But God has never given it to me. And I have to be okay with not having it. I've got other gifts.

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Now there is another side to the sin of jealousy, and that is the sin of pride that can come when we have been given a particular gift. It is easy to judge the people around us for not possessing the gifts we have.

But we need to remember that God is the giver of gifts, and He doesn't give them out equally or fairly. This is His prerogative. And so the purpose of our gift is not to elevate ourselves above the people around us, but to serve them.

Paul described the church as a body, and so we are to use the different gifts and abilities we have to build each other up.

So when you see someone with a spiritual gift that you desire: maybe they have great faith, or the ability to teach or help or speak in tongues or prophecy. Maybe it is a gift of healing. Whatever gift they possess, allow yourself to desire it. And pursue this desire in prayer. Maybe God will give it to you. But refuse to measure yourself by whether you possess it or not. Gifts aren't virtues that good Christians get, they are things God gives out free of our merit – they are gifts. So refuse to measure the people around you by the graces God has poured out on them or you.

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So the power of God has a price, and that price is suffering. But it is also precious to see the power of God. It is worth any price you have to pay. And this is something we see in this text.

So when the Sadducees, infected by jealousy, imprison the Apostles, an angel of the Lord opens the doors and lets them out.

Imagine the commotion. Jails are fairly secure structures. They have walls and doors and guards. And they are designed to keep people in. But when the Spirit of God is involved walls and doors and guards are irrelevant.

It's like the guards the Romans posted outside Jesus' tomb – I love these guys. They were armed and prepared for thieves to attempt to break into the tomb and steal the body, but they hadn't considered that the real threat was inside. No one was coming to get Jesus, Jesus was breaking out! The power of God is precious. So let's ask for God to stretch out His hand in power and perform signs and wonders to the glory of Jesus that we might be His witnesses and that this city might be won for Him.

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One final caveat here. This isn't the health and wealth gospel. The Good News is not that if you follow Jesus then you will get out of jail free. That's what happens in this part of Acts 5, but it doesn't work out like this all the time.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:4

So in Acts 7 we are going to come across Stephen. He's a man full of the Spirit. But he is going to get stoned to death not delivered. And then in Acts 12 the Apostle James – this is Peter, James and John, one of Jesus' closest disciples – is going to get cut down with a sword by Herod and no angel is going to deliver him.

So what happens in situations like these? What happens when you pray and God doesn't act the way you asked? Is His power still precious then?

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The answer is "yes". God's power is precious even when He doesn't save because it is God's power not our own. None of us can harness the power of God. None of us can cause Him to do our bidding. The Spirit always works for God, He has no other master. So God's power is precious because it always resides only in the hands of an all good, all wise, all powerful God. SO when things don't go as we hope, our job is to trust His plan.

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A second thing that is precious about the power of God is that when it comes and fills us we find ourselves doing what God wants us to do. "God equips us with everything good for doing His will."<sup>3</sup> And God's will is that we be His witnesses and bear testimony to the new life that He has given us.

Notice what the angel of the Lord tells the apostles when he sets them free – verse 20 – "Go, stand in the temple courts... and tell the people all about this new life."

So when God's Spirit shows up in your life He does this for a purpose. And the purpose is that we in turn give the life He has given us away. You and I will bear witness to the power of God to those around us, pointing them to eternal life and the forgiveness of sins, and a relationship with God, and the existence of His very real power today. God's Spirit falls on people so that they can partner with Him in giving the gift of new life to the world. And that's precious.

So brothers and sisters, pray that God will stretch out His hand to heal and perform signs and wonders for the glory of Jesus. Without seeing His Spirit move we can't be His witnesses. So pray this over your life and the life of the church every day this week. And pray that He will pour out His Spirit on you and on us and that we will be courageous to bear witness to this new life.

And finally, set your eyes on the gifts you desire God to give you, pray for them. But resist the temptation to be jealous for what He doesn't give, or proud of what He does. God's gifts all belong to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 13:20