

## **The Continuing Acts of Jesus: Power for Presentation and Perseverance**

Acts 5:21-42

May 28, 2017

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Please open the Bible on your device, or grab the one from the pew in front of you and turn to Acts chapter 5.

Over the last couple months we've been digging into the book of Acts, which is driven forward by the last words Jesus gave His disciples before ascending back to heaven. These words are probably familiar by now. You might even have them memorized. Jesus said:

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)

And Luke, the author of Acts, was captured by this statement. He was blown away by it. And so he records the story here of how Jesus' words came to pass.

So Acts is about a bunch of very normal and ordinary men and women, who encountered Jesus' Holy Spirit. And when this happened these ordinary people were filled with power. So they start doing and saying things that ordinary people can't do and say. These uneducated fishermen with perpetual foot-in-mouth syndrome started speaking with authority and teaching in a way that impressed even the most educated religious elite.

And then, with Jesus' Spirit inside them, they started doing the things Jesus did. The sick were getting healed. Demons were being cast out. The poor were taken care of. And the message of hope and eternal life was getting preached all over Jerusalem. And thousands of people were giving their lives to following Jesus.

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Now today we are coming to the end of a story that started last week. So last Sunday we picked up Acts 5 in verse 12 just after Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead after lying to God. At this point the church was still gathering in Solomon's Colonnade where Jesus had used Peter and John to heal the crippled beggar. And now Peter's shadow had developed a healing ministry of its own. People were lining the streets with their sick friends and family all hoping Peter would pass and his shadow might fall over them and they would be healed.

But of course Peter's shadow was nothing special, even Peter was nothing special. It was the Spirit of Jesus that was doing all these miracles for a purpose. And the purpose was to transform normal people into witnesses of His power that wouldn't be able to keep their mouths shut. And this is what happened.

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Now the evidence is in, the Spirit is still in this business today. Amen? God is still on the move. He is still pouring out His Spirit and filling people with power. He is still transforming ordinary people into Jesus-witnesses. Amen?

And today I'd like to call on Brooklyn and Emma to come and tell us what Jesus did in them this last weekend while they were down at History Maker on the youth trip.

[Brooklyn and Emma]

Thank you very much ladies for bearing witness to the fact that God is just as active today as He was 2000 years ago.

If you've got your Bible open let's pick up the story in Acts 5 verse 21 just after an angel broke the apostles out of jail.

[Read Acts 5:21-26]

Now a lot of this account is similar to what happened in chapters 3 and 4. So there Peter and John ended up in prison after teaching the crowds that in Jesus crippled legs are nothing. In Jesus there is resurrection from the dead and hope of eternal life. Oh, and they were also teaching that even though many of the people in the crowd weren't even there, they, and the religious leaders, were responsible for killing Jesus. But no worries, God raised Him from the dead.

Now the Sadducees didn't appreciate this message so they gave them one free night's stay in jail and warned them not to speak "in that name" anymore.

But Peter and John replied, "We understand you are upset, but here's the problem. God told us we should keep using the name of Jesus. And to back it up He's healing crippled people. So you let us know whether you think we should listen to you or Him."

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Now today the Apostles as a group have been locked up, but this time instead of being released in the morning God busts them out in the night.

Verse 19 says "An angel of the Lord" let them out. Now there are three ways to read this little phrase, all of which are appropriate.

So first, this could be a real angel that let the apostles out of jail and commanded them to head back to the temple courts and keep preaching.

But Luke's words here state a little more than that. He says an "angel of the Lord" let them out. And every Jew who read these words would immediately be drawn back to a powerful picture from the Old Testament. And that is of *the Angel of the LORD*.

So Abraham and Moses both had personal run-ins with The Angel of the LORD. Joshua met the Angel of the LORD. So did Gideon. Balaam's donkey and then Balaam met this same Angel of the LORD. And a few others.

And each time this "Angel" is encountered He operates differently than all the other angel encounters that we come across in scripture. So usually when people meet angels they fall down and attempt to worship – it is never a comfortable experience to come face to face with the supernatural. But then the angel says something like:

Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God! (Revelation 22:9)

But when the Angel of the LORD shows up things are different. People fall down, and He lets them stay down. Or He tells them "take your shoes off because even the ground around Me is holy." This Angel accepts worship because this Angel is God.<sup>1</sup>

But this poses a problem because other texts in the Old Testament tell us anyone who sees God dies, but this never happens when someone interacts with the Angel of the LORD. Instead they come away encouraged, and full of vision about what God wants them to do, and generally more alive than they were before. And so while it is obvious that this is God, the fact that the people don't die tells us something else is going on.

And so theologians generally agree that whenever the Angel of the LORD shows up it is the pre-incarnate Christ people are interacting with. Jesus lived forever, even before He was born – don't try the math on that. But Jesus is God's manifestation of Himself that He has designed in such a way that we can handle Him. Jesus is the fullness of God, but He is veiled in human flesh. Jesus is the Angel of the LORD.

And here in Acts Luke makes a reference to this that all his Jewish readers would have caught. Jesus is busting His boys out of jail.

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But there is a hint that actually something else is going on here. And that is that this angel of the LORD isn't Jesus Himself, but someone who looks like Jesus because they have Jesus' Spirit in them.

So if you were here two weeks ago you would have heard Dave and Dorala's testimony about meeting some very unlikely looking angels on the side of the highway who helped them pull a cushion from under their car, and then blessed them in the name of Jesus.

And Dave and Dorala said "These were angels that God sent to help us."

Now, when we speak like this we mean a couple of different things. So in Hebrews 13 we are admonished:

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2)

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<sup>1</sup> See Exodus 3:2-4 for example

The point Hebrews is making is that the supernatural world is very real, and it interacts with our world. So don't make the mistake of thinking that what you can see with your eyes is the extent of what is real. Just because some people are wearing funny clothes and driving a jalopy doesn't mean they can't be angels. Instead live in a way that expects to interact with the supernatural. This is what it means to develop eyes able to see God on the move.

But the word "angel" also has a more general meaning. So in Hebrew the word *malachi*, which is translated "angel", means messenger of God. And in this sense anyone who brings God's message is God's angel. So there was a prophet named Malachi who brought God's message to God's people – he was God's angel.

Now if you look down at verse 26 you see that when the Sadducees are told that the apostles are back in the temple they decide not to use force to remove them because they fear the people.

Here is what many commentators think is happening:<sup>2</sup> The Sadducees are realizing that the apostles have more support than they imagined. If some people from the crowd had managed to help them jailbreak – and these people would have had to be high up the ladder to pull this off – then they had better not push their luck with inciting the people to anger. It's a good way to get stoned or worse. Perhaps the Romans would come and take their power away.

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A second thing that hints this angel may have been *just* a man full of Jesus' Spirit is the lack of detail. So in Acts 12 an angel busts Peter out of prison. But in that instance the chains are going to fall from Peter's wrists and ankles without being noticed by the two guards who are actually chained to him. Then iron gates are going to open of their own accord, and finally the angel is going to suddenly disappear in front of Peter as soon as he is outside the walls. So it's obvious that this is not a natural event.

But here in Acts 5 Luke tells us hardly anything about how the angel did this. And that's probably because this angel was a very unspectacular messenger of God.

Now this doesn't mean the escape was any less of a miracle. This messenger of God is full of the Spirit of Jesus! And Luke's point in Acts is to show us that very normal people take on the likeness of Jesus when the power of the Spirit falls on them. God is at work in the midst of the mundane.

Friends, Luke wants us to know this is God's world, and He is committed to increasing His glory and expanding His kingdom here. And this is a more real reality than the reality we spend our lives living in: going to work, paying bills and feeding our family. All good things, but they aren't ultimate things. A thousand years from now your credit rating, RRSP's and education won't matter - but your ability to see Jesus will.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example FF Bruce "The Book of Acts" (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Pub Co), 1988. Pg 110

So the danger is not that we incorrectly attribute something to God when in fact He isn't present – God is always present! The mistake we make is the opposite. We end up viewing the world through faithless, natural eyes that think the physical is all there is, and fail to realize that God is active in everything all the time. That's the mistake.

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So I've got three pieces of homework for us so that we stop making this mistake. Here is the first one: Look at your mundane and refuse to be faithless. Yes, you are experiencing challenges. Yes there are obstacles to overcome. Yes, your health problems are real – no one is saying they aren't. Yes, your relational and financial struggles are intense. Yes, there are unknowns in your future that you can't control. But these things aren't evidence that God is absent.

Friends, God is in the Dark Valley. In fact He is the biggest and scariest thing in the Valley.<sup>3</sup> So ask God to give you eyes that see real reality, and then get ready to be blown away. God's messengers are all around you.

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Let's pick it up the text again in verse 27 and see where they show up here.

[Read Acts 5:27-32]

So the Sadducees are pretty ticked that their wishes aren't being respected. But the apostles can't help it, they are witnesses. Instead of quieting down, they ramp up. And so the Sadducees accuse them of filling all Jerusalem with their teaching. They've filled Jerusalem! This is exactly the accusation they were hoping to get.

Remember Acts 1. This is what Jesus said would happen. First these normal men and women would be filled with His Spirit, and then they would be transformed into witnesses who would fill Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria and finally the world with testimonies about what they have seen and heard. And now Jerusalem has encountered Jesus' witnesses and been transformed.

So here is the second piece of homework: If you've been filled with Jesus' Spirit, and His power, have you filled your Jerusalem with His teaching? Friends, it's not a mistake we've been put here. And the encounter with the Spirit God has given us isn't for us, it is for us to give away. The power God has given us has a purpose, and that is that we present Christ to those He has put beside us. So have you filled Jerusalem with your witness to the power of Jesus? Or are you on your way to doing this?

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Now it is easy to get complacent in this; it's easy to go through life on the misquoted advice "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words."<sup>4</sup> But this is as helpful as someone who says "Feed the hungry at all times, and if necessary use food."

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 23:4-6

<sup>4</sup> This is attributed to St Francis of Assisi, but he never actually said it. In fact he preached with words all the time and was simply concerned that his actions line up with his words.

The reality is, if we are going to effectively fill our Jerusalem with testimonies of the power of God we are going to have to use words. So your homework is to prepare. Pray “Jesus, who do you want me to present my encounter with Christ’s power to?”

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Now, if this is as scary for you as it is for me then perhaps it will be helpful to break it down. So is there someone in your life who needs to encounter the power of God? What is their name? Who have you been put beside that needs an encounter with the power of Jesus?

If you can’t think of someone, then pray that God will bring someone into your life. But after you’ve got the name of someone then pray for two things: first pray for God to prepare this person to receive the power of the Gospel. The Word says no one comes to Jesus unless the Father draws them.<sup>5</sup> So pray that He will draw them. And second, pray for the boldness to present Christ and His power.<sup>6</sup>

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Friends, it isn’t a mistake God has put you in the situation you find yourself in now. Your job is to bring Christ into that situation. So become His angel, look for ways to speak and act in the way Jesus would if He were in your shoes... because He is.

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Let’s keep moving with verse 33:

[Read Acts 5:33-42]

So the Sadducees, who are the people officially in control in the temple, want to kill the apostles, but the Pharisees object. Now catch the humor here.

Jesus didn’t get along with the Sadducees or the Pharisees. The Sadducees were spiritual liberals who didn’t believe in the miraculous, and didn’t think God was active in the world. The Sadducees didn’t fear God they feared the Romans. And so they worked to use religion to control the people so the Romans wouldn’t come and take their power away. And the very presence of Jesus threw their world into chaos. In Jesus, God was breaking into the world to birth His supernatural kingdom in a way that could never agree with their kind of thinking.

But Jesus didn’t get along with the Pharisees either. If the Sadducees were liberals, the Pharisees were fundamentalists. Now they started out good. They wanted to make sure Israel never fell into the idolatry that got them banished from the Promised Land and enslaved in Babylon. But their mistake was thinking the way to do this was to get everyone to obey God’s Law down to the letter. And the problem with Jesus for them was that He was too liberal. Jesus was, and is, always more interested in people keeping than rule keeping.

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<sup>5</sup> John 6:44

<sup>6</sup> Acts 4:29

And so the Pharisees hated the freedom that Jesus lived in – they were scarred of it. It felt like a slide towards sin. They feared God, but they didn't understand that God's primary desire for His people was not obedience, but love. God wants us to see Him as lovely and want to give our lives to Him. He wants to woo us to Himself, like a man chasing a woman, and have us fall in love with Him. And the Pharisees could not get that so they hated Jesus.

But here we get a battle between the Sadducees and the Pharisees that results in the apostles freedom. And Gamaliel unintentionally becomes an angel of the Lord.

Friends, God is sovereign. He is going to make His kingdom come and His will be done on earth like it is in heaven. And no prison walls or political agenda is going to stand in His way. He can even use Pharisees to accomplish His purposes.

So in verses 38 and 39 Gamaliel says "Let these men go! For if their purpose... 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."

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Now I suspect Gamaliel thinks the apostles are going to fail. He thinks they are going to be like the disciples of Theudas and the disciples of Judas the Galilean. "They killed Jesus, so it is only a matter of time." And since the Sadducees don't believe in the resurrection, and they don't believe in the supernatural, and they don't believe in life after death they are convinced.

But the irony is Gamaliel has no idea how right he actually is. And unintentionally he ends up speaking Holy Spirit inspired, Jesus-honouring hope into an impossible situation. Gamaliel ends up being God's messenger.

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Now Christian hope is different from the way the world speaks of hope. So most often we use this word to say things like "I sure hope it doesn't rain tomorrow" or, "I sure hope the Canucks win the cup next year and stop disappointing everyone." But this kind of hope is just wishful thinking. We have no confidence that it will happen.

But Christian hope is different because it is built on the truth that God is sovereign and in complete control. He wins every battle He fights. So there is nothing we can do, intentionally or unintentionally to slow down the expanse of His kingdom.

If in my plans to bring Jesus glory I miss the wisest option and end up with a ministry that fails, God isn't up in heaven slapping His forehead and saying "Oh no, what am I going to do now? Why can't Dan get it together? Now how is My kingdom going to grow in PG?" So in Romans Paul says:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
(Romans 8:38-39)

This is the foundation of Christian hope. It is assurance that whatever we are facing God will overcome. It is the knowledge that Jesus wins in the end. It's like watching a James Bond movie and knowing that no matter how impossible a situation 007 finds himself in he is going to get out because everyone knows there is always going to be another Bond movie.

This is the hope Gamaliel unintentionally taps into. If God is behind these men then there is nothing any of us can do to stop them.

And friends, God is moving today. And there is nothing anyone can do, intentionally or unintentionally to stop His kingdom. So here is homework number 3. Ask yourself "What is standing in the way of me participating with Jesus in the increase of His glory? Where do you need the power of the Holy Spirit to fill you with the kind of hope Gamaliel didn't realize he had? Is there some temptation you can't overcome? Some attitude that is destroying your joy? Is there some sickness that is filling you with fear? Or some relationship trouble that has you feeling unworthy of being His witness?

Friend, God is in control. He is on the throne of heaven, and His will will be accomplished. So trust Him. Choose to trust Him in the midst of your circumstance and be bold to present His Gospel from the midst of your mundane.

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This text ends with the Sadducees agreeing not to kill the apostles and instead just flogging them. It's a nice compromise. But I love the last two verses. The apostles aren't just having a good attitude. They aren't looking at the glass as half full. Luke records that they left the flogging rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer because of the Name of Jesus. And then heading out even more committed to proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the path to joy everyone is seeking.

Brothers and sisters, there is no promise in scripture that we will not face difficulty. There is no promise that there won't be pain in our bodies or our relationships or our finances. But there is a promise that God's kingdom will not stop growing. And God is inviting us to participate with this winning agenda. This is where the joy is. So whatever situation you find yourself in let the Holy Spirit fill you with the power to hope in this reality. God is giving you an opportunity to partner with Him in the increase of His glory.

Don't miss this. Do your homework. First, look at what normal every-day life is for you and refuse to be faithless – make the decision to look for where God is in the midst of your mundane. Second, fill your Jerusalem with your witness to the power of Jesus. Pray for who He wants you to present the Gospel to, and pray for boldness to do it. And finally, as you face opposition of any kind set your eyes on Christ and persevere.

The very Spirit of Jesus lives in you. He has equipped and empowered you to participate with Him in increasing His glory and expanding His kingdom. Friends, this week don't miss out on this opportunity.

I love you guys.