

# The Sequel

## Jesus Continued in the Book of Acts

### PERIL AND PERSISTENCE

### Christian Courage amid Opposition

A Prep Guide for Session Three

with Dr. Allen R. Hilton

#### Open – Faith and Risk

Being Christian in the U.S. feels pretty safe. In secular company, there's the occasional sidelong glance that says, "You believe that stuff?!" And some American church-goers imagine that barring prayer in schools or forbidding a nativity in the town square or, in the case of an admirable young NFL football star called C.J. Stroud, having gratitude to Jesus edited out of your interview at publication – that these sorts of resistance constitute persecution. And in a way they may. But this use of the "P" word would surprise Coptic Christians in Egypt, where 128 were killed for their faith in 2017. (*The Guardian*, Jan 10, 2018). It also might raise the eyebrows of Chinese Christians, whose churches have been bulldozed by the government, (Council on Foreign Relations, Oct 11, 2018), have been forced to remove all Christian symbols from their own homes or lose public services (*Christianity Today*, Nov 17, 2017), and are often arrested for singing hymns together in public parks (*Christianity Today*, Oct 17, 2017).

So how would a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christian in the United States or another religiously tolerant nation be called to take risks for God? We'll look for answers to this question as we observe the earliest Christians navigating their first months and years of church life in Jerusalem.

#### Part One – Original Bliss

We saw last session that Luke's language to describe common everyday life in the first Christian community mirrors ancient utopian visions about the way people ought to live together. I want here to supply you with the texts that ground this claim, a couple of which you saw on slides.

Twice in the first five chapters of Acts, Luke highlights their custom of sharing their material goods with one another. Within a summary in 2.42-47, he writes, "All the believers were in the same place and they had all things in common. They were selling both their property and their belongings and were distributing them to all of the people as they had need (2.44-45)." Again in 4.32-35, a Luke summarizes, "the whole number of those who had believed were of one heart and mind, and not even one person was calling anything among his

belongings his own, but all things were in common.”

These descriptions may sound idyllic or awful to you, depending on how you look at the world; but for many ancient philosophers the vision of shared goods and common life described Eden or nirvana – the ideal form of Greco-Roman philosophical friendship – and Luke knew that. Ancient authors often idealized the beginnings of human community by suggesting that “in those days” private property did not exist.

- Greece. Plato’s *Critias* pictures the military class during the earliest days of Athens in these terms: “It was supplied with all that was required for its sustenance and training, and none of its members possessed any private property, but they regarded all they had as the common property of all.” Plato elsewhere expands this vision to include the entire city, decrying private wealth as counter-productive to both harmony and production in his utopian community. (*Republic* 420C-422B; and *Laws* 679B-C).
- Rome. The poet Ovid depicts an ancient Golden Age when people needed no armies or nations or borders, because they lived cooperatively with one another and with the earth. “The earth herself, without compulsion, untouched by hoe or plowshare, of herself gave all things needful. And people, content with food which came with no one’s seeking, gathered the arbut fruit, strawberries from the mountainsides, cherries and berries hanging thick upon the prickly bramble, and acorns fallen from the spreading tree of Jove.” (*Metamorphosis* 1.88)

The ancient philosophical topic of friendship provides a second subject that produces language that resembles Luke’s.

- A biographer named Diogenes Laertius writes, “Pythagoras was the first to say, ‘Friends have all things in common’. And in fact, his disciples did put all their possessions into one common stock.” (*Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 8.10)
- Aristotle writes, “[The principle] ‘among friends everything is in common’ is quite correct, for friendship consists in sharing (*Greek: Koinonia*) ... and the maxim is indeed true that ‘among friends everything is common.’” (*Nicomachean Ethics*)
- The Greek poet Euripides writes, “True friends cling not to private property; Their wealth is shared in close community.” (*Andromache* 6-7)

I could go on and on, for the examples are many. In the world Luke knew, the community of material goods was a well-known ideal, not only among philosophers, but also among other educated and philosophically-minded Greeks and Romans.

Right next to the community of goods in Acts 4.32 and thematically related to it is the singleness of heart Luke attributes to the Jerusalem church. He writes, “The whole number of those who had believed was a single heart and soul.” This language reflects another main concept from the ancient discussion of friendship.

- Aristotle calls friends “one soul” in two bodies (*Nicomachean Ethics* 9).
- Cicero also reflects this theme, mentioning it twice in his essay, *On Friendship* and once in *On First Things*, once even expanding the merger to include many souls in a unity (*unus....animus....ex pluribus*).

You get the picture: ancient people would have recognized that “having all things in common” and being “one soul and heart” were hallmarks of an ideal community. Luke’s description of the earliest Christians in Jerusalem echoes Greek and Roman portraits of the ideal philosophical friendship or human group. In his picture, the original Jerusalem Christians lived in epic bliss.

As we turn a corner now, from this epic bliss to the opposition that arose against the early Christian movement in Jerusalem, we ought to notice another of Luke’s brilliant between-the-lines winks at us. We’ll soon discover that, under fire from the powerful Sanhedrin’s demand that they cease their work, Peter and John answered with simple defiance.

“We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

Any educated member of Luke’s ancient audience would immediately have recognized a resemblance. Peter’s words harken back 400 years to one of the most famous scenes in western history, when the Athenian powers that were put Socrates on trial. Having been arrested for “corrupting the youth” and “introducing foreign deities,” Socrates launched his now-immortal defense:

“Men of Athens, I salute you and love you, but I will obey the god rather than you.”  
(Plato, *Apology* 29D)

Socrates was regarded by ancient Greco-Roman society as the premiere philosopher of all time. Looking like Socrates, in most philosophical and popular circles, came to mean being right. Here before the Sanhedrin, by the Spirit of God, Peter and John, two illiterate former fishermen, look an awful lot like Socrates before the Athenian people. Their brand of bold courage equaled the very best.

## Part Two – Trouble in Paradise

You know the feeling: everything’s perfect. Life is in order, rhythms are steady, everything is popping. Then the serpent comes into the garden, the fly lands in the ointment, the wrench hits the gears. Suddenly, there’s trouble in paradise.

In the Jerusalem church, all was well. Better, actually. Peter’s preaching had swept the city, and people were flocking to church – house by house. The new believers learned the apostles’ teachings and prayed with one another. As Robert Browning put it, “God was in

God's heaven and all was right with the world."

Then one day, as Peter and John walked their normal route to the Temple court, a disabled man asked them for money. These disciples hadn't fished for years, and the church treasury was designed to feed and clothe church members, so Peter didn't have a lot of cash. He had to think on his feet: "Silver and gold have we none, but what we do have we give you. In the name of Jesus, hop up and walk!" I picture a hush. Then the guy who couldn't walk before stands up and does more than that: he starts "walking and leaping and praising God." All Jerusalem gawked, jaws on the ground, so Peter seized the moment: "If you're wondering how that happened..." and a healing became a sermon and it wasn't long before "many who heard Peter's message believed; so the number of men [not even counting the women and children] numbered around 5,000."

It was a great moment! Who could complain? It wasn't the Sabbath, it violated no laws, but the Temple authorities had already had enough. They locked Peter and John up – for preaching the resurrection from the dead (Acts 4.2—Sadducees did not believe in that) or for doing magic (4.7 – "By what power do you do this thing?") or whatever they could think of to justify their arrest. One way or another, these guys were going to throw the book at the apostles. They wanted to nip this Jesus movement in the bud, and they thought the best way to do this was to lock up their leaders.

The authorities, not wanting to risk playing the black-hat-and-wax-mustache role, released Peter and John and "warned them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." But soon these two were back for another stay (Acts 5.18 – "They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail."), and then another (Acts 5.40 – "They called the apostles in and had them flogged."). Everything had been so perfect...then suddenly the two stars of the show got themselves thrown into Jewish jail three times! Let's take a look.

### **Part Three – Standing Up**

We should expect the apostles to wilt under heat. After all, Peter was the one who caved, during Jesus' trial, under the pressure of "a servant girl" outside the high priest's house. (Luke 22.56) Peter himself wasn't even in danger of arrest then, but he cowered and denied Jesus three times. Now, the mighty Sanhedrin of Jerusalem, the same group that wielded their considerable power to arrest Jesus and hand him to Pilate, had their sights on him. They threw Peter into jail and then court. If past performance predicts future results, Peter was doomed to another cowardly display.

That's not how things went, though. Here's the script from Acts.

#### ***Arrest #1***

After the Sanhedrin arrests Jesus and interrogates him about the source of the apostles' power, he stands up:

“Rulers of the people and elders, <sup>9</sup>if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, <sup>10</sup>let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, <sup>11</sup>whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. <sup>12</sup>This Jesus <sup>13</sup>is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’ <sup>14</sup>There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4.7-12)

When the Sanhedrin hears these powerful words from a Galilean fisherman, they’re astonished. They call it bold courage (Acts 4.13 – *Greek: Parrhesia*)

### ***Arrest #2***

Before releasing Peter and John, the Sanhedrin sternly ordered them never to speak about this Jesus again, but Peter and John couldn’t help themselves. They ran to the brothers and sisters of the church and told them all that God had done. Surely all these new Christians would be afraid when they heard about Peter and John’s arrest and flogging, right? Not at all! The whole group prayed, the place shook, and

“they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4.31 – *Greek: Parrhesia*)

Peter and John hit the streets again, so a second arrest was inevitable.

*Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. (Acts 5.17)*

This time, the apostles didn’t stay long, because an angel of the Lord sprang them from their cell. When the powerful Sanhedrin gathered for Peter and John’s trial, in a comic scene no one could find them. The angel had made a fool of the whole proceedings.

### ***Arrest #3***

All of this led to a third arrest.

*When the temple police...did not find Peter and John in the prison...they returned and reported, “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on. (Acts 5.22-24)*

A search ensued, but they didn't have to look long before "someone arrived and announced, 'Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!'"

There's a pattern developing here.

1. Peter and John preach.
2. The authorities lock them up and hope to scare them.
3. The apostles are not intimidated.
4. The authorities release Peter and John with a warning.
5. Peter and John preach...

Lather, Rinse, Repeat. In this third case, when the embarrassed Sanhedrin discovers that these miscreants have defied their direct demand, they let themselves get pulled back into the cycle again and risk Alcoholics Anonymous's famous definition of insanity. They arrest Peter and John for the third time and interrogate them...again.

"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." (5.28)

In reply, Peter says, essentially, "You're big, but you're not biggest." His defiant words were these:

"We must obey God rather than any human authority." (Acts 5.29)

As you might expect, this sort of disregard for their authority didn't sit well with the Sanhedrin.

"They were enraged and wanted to kill them."

If the great rabbi Gamaliel (Paul's own mentor, as we'll find out later) hadn't interrupted, the cycle would have gone on and on and on. But the great teacher interrupted with a bit of perspective and wisdom. He argued that they ought to let these fellows do their best and then watch God sort the results.

*"Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is*

*of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” (Acts 5.26-29)*

Let them go, says Gamaliel, and God will sort things out. Grudgingly, the Sanhedrin agreed...for the moment.

### **Opposition Intensifies**

If Gamaliel’s words made an impact with the Sanhedrin, it didn’t last long. The very next paragraph in the Book of Acts introduces Stephen the Deacon, whom these leaders will kill by stoning. Stephen’s story occupies most of Acts 6 and all of Acts 7. To supply context for it, though, Luke opens chapter 6 with a brief window into the growing church’s logistical challenges. The apostles have become overburdened with too many duties, between teaching, preaching, healing, the occasional skirmish with Jewish authorities, and allotment of the church’s food and shared goods. Food distribution had especially become a problem, so to resolve this issue, the apostles told the community to choose helpers.

*The twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, brothers and sisters, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.”*

[Note: The first deacons were all men, but female deacons and even apostles would soon appear in churches, at least in Paul’s ministry, as we learn of Phoebe the deaconess in Romans 16.1 and Junia in Romans 16.7.]

This brief window into early church polity quickly gives way to the larger narrative of Stephen’s message and the eventually-violent response of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem.

If you ever need a brief review of the Israel’s history, Acts 7 is a good start. Stephen there uses 1,220 words in our English translation – equivalent to about a 12 minute sermon – rendering a relatively normal narrative that spans from Abraham to Solomon. Given the close eye High Priest and his people have paid to Peter and John, we probably assume that they are out monitoring this speech and ready to pounce. But it is hard to imagine that he’s causing much of a ruckus among them in this historical reconstruction.

The last 70 words, on the other hand, did not go over so well, because Stephen’s tone shifted drastically as he closed.

*“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the*

prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.” (Acts 7.51-53)

Not long after this, the narrator tells us that the high priest and the members of his gathered council “covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.”

What followed was all out war.

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison. (Acts 8.1-3)

The stoning of Stephen ramped up both the passion of the opposition to the Jerusalem church and the fear of its members.”

### **Close**

We’ve lived for a while now on the streets of Jerusalem and in the jailhouses of the Sanhedrin. It’s time to travel back to the streets of our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives and ask what are the Sanhedrin and jailhouses of our time. To what kind of bold courage is the church of our time called, in an age and a place where no one’s locking us up and insisting that we stop telling about Jesus? This question will make it into our discussion Thursday evening as we gather and read together. I’ll see you then.



