

04. Acts 5:1 - 7:2



The call to repent and be saved Acts 5:1-42

Acts 5:1-6

A man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

Acts 5:7-II

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

For the first time, Luke calls the community ‘church’ [ἐκκλησία], a word which highlights the call of the risen Lord in response to which the community gathers to pray, to attend to the teaching of those who witness to Jesus, and to live together in his love.

As noted in the commentary on Acts 1:9-11, there was in the early church a belief that they were living in a new creation and that this creation would be soon manifest, a world which would recognise Jesus as the fulfilment of the promises made by God to Israel, a world in which God's will would be done 'on earth as in heaven'. There is evidence of this in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, composed c.50AD. The fact that Jesus had been raised to life, and that he was the first fruits of a new harvest was enough to give rise to such an expectation. For this reason, as the same letter of Paul demonstrates, some were shocked when members of the community died without seeing the new creation. [Ananias and Sapphira](#) are the first deaths mentioned. The incidents recorded here by Luke seem to witness to the Jerusalem community's falling back to the traditional explanation of these sudden deaths as a punishment for sin.

Those who were welcomed into the community of Jesus' disciples were promised a full outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a share in the intimacy with God enjoyed by the risen Jesus. Luke has just shown us the fruit of this gift in the generosity shown in the community. Barnabas stands out as an example of this (see 5:37). However, though God's gifts are always unconditionally offered, they are conditionally received. People are free to welcome or to reject the gift. For this reason, Simeon, as he took to himself the infant Jesus, could say: 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel' (Luke 2:34).

Barnabas is the first offered for our imitation. Ananias is the first offered as a warning. In breaking faith with the community, he is breaking faith with the risen Jesus.

Light is also thrown on Luke's purpose by a reflection on the primeval sin. In its presentation of the garden of paradise, the Book of Genesis gives us a portrait of what life should be as intended by God. However, for paradise to be experienced we must welcome it as a gift from God. The sin of Adam and Eve is typical of our human sinfulness. We give in to the temptation to want to grasp for ourselves what can come only as a grace. Hence the ambiguity and struggle of the human condition as we receive it and as we hand it on. Because of their sin, Adam and Eve find themselves excluded from the garden.

So it is with Ananias and Sapphira. As commonly in Luke, it is love of material riches that is their downfall: ‘**Woe to you who are rich**’ (Luke 6:24; see Luke 16:19-31; 18:18-27). There is a link here also with the fate of Judas (see Acts 1:18). Even within the community of the risen Jesus, we can fail to welcome his Spirit. We can try to save ourselves (see Luke 9:34). This sin must be named clearly from the outset.

Acts 5:12-16

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico (see Acts 3:11). None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

‘All in the crowd were trying to touch Jesus for power came out of him and healed all of them’ (Luke 6:19).

Luke 5:17-21

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. But during the night an **Angel of the Lord** opened the prison doors, **brought them out** [compare Exodus 16:6], and said, “Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.” When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with **their teaching**. [liberated for mission!]

The apostles are arrested and imprisoned, but they are miraculously rescued by an ‘Angel of the Lord’. Again and again during their escape from Egypt, the Israelites are miraculously protected by an angel of the Lord. It was the same for Joshua, whose army was led by a divine messenger (see Joshua 5:13-15). It is clear from Judges 2:1-5, that the Angel is the Lord himself, spoken of in this way out of respect for God’s transcendent holiness.

Acts 5:21-26

When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the temple police went there they did not find them in the prison; so 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. Then someone arrived and announced, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!” Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

There are a number of links between the language used here to describe the discovery of the empty prison and the description of the discovery of the empty tomb in Luke's account of the resurrection of Jesus. Both are set at 'daybreak' (see Luke 24:1). In both situations those who come are unable to find what they are seeking (see Luke 24:2-3), and they return and report what they have experienced (see Luke 24:9). In both scenes people are 'perplexed' (see Luke 24:4).

Jesus' disciples are experiencing his death and resurrection in their lives.

Acts 5:27-32

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, “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.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree [see Deuteronomy 21:23]. God exalted him at his right hand [Psalm 118:16] as Leader and Saviour (compare Luke 2:11) that he might give repentance (compare Luke 5:32) to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

Acts 5:33-39

When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law (Paul's teacher Acts 22:3), respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, "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.

Josephus puts the uprising of Theudas during the governorship of Fadus (44-46AD), some ten years after the events being described here. Judas the Galilean led a revolt in 6AD.

Acts 5:38-42

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!”

They were convinced by him, and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged (compare Luke 23:22). Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim (εὐαγγελίζω) Jesus as the Messiah.

Acts 6:1-4

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists [Greek speaking Jewish Christians from outside Judea (and so no support)] complained against the Hebrews (local Aramaic speaking Jews) because their widows were being neglected in the daily ministry (διακονία) of distribution of food. And 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 minister at the table. Therefore, brethren, 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 the ministry of the word.'

Is this the beginnings of a conflict about the Gentile mission?

When the Israelites complained during their desert journey, God fed them with manna from heaven (see Exodus 17). How was God to nourish these especially needy members of the community? During the desert journey, Moses father-in-law, Jethro, advised him against trying to do everything himself:

The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone ... You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God ... they will bear the burden with you' (Exodus 18:18-22).

The apostles see the need to find others who can minister (διακονεω, see 1:17) at table for the Greek-speaking Christians. διακονεω is used for serving at table, but in a religious context. The servant is one who ministers as a servant of the Lord. Luke uses it in this sense in his Gospel (see Luke 4:39; 8:3; 10:40; 17:8). Jesus assures his disciples that if they are faithful in carrying out the will of their lord, he himself will come and serve them: ‘Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them’ (Luke 12:37).

The following text is particularly relevant, for the setting is the table of the last supper: ‘The leader among you must become like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves’ (Luke 22:26-27).

Acts 6:5-7

What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch (the Seven, Acts 21:8). They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Paul recognises that he has ‘received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles’ (Romans 1:5).

The laying on of hands is a gesture used in many and varied situations in the New Testament, as in the Old. In essence it demonstrates a recognition of communion in the blessing of God. Here, as in other places (see Acts 13:3; 14:23), it includes a recognition that God has called a person to carry out a certain ministry within the community.

Acts 6:8

Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

Like Jesus (see Luke 4:36; 5:17), and like the apostles (Acts 1:8; 4:33), Stephen is described as being full of grace and power.

Like Jesus (Acts 2:22), and like the apostles (Acts 2:43; 5:12), he does great wonders and signs among the people. Just as Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is powerfully active in and through the apostles, so now he is powerfully active in and through the Seven.

Acts 6:9-12

Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia (Paul, Acts 21:39) and Asia (Acts 21:27), stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke (Luke 21:15). Then they secretly instigated some men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God (compare Luke 5:21).” They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council.

Like Jesus (see Luke 22:66), and like the apostles (Acts 4:7)
Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin.

Parallels to trial of Jesus

Jesus had said: ‘They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues ... This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict’ (Luke 21:12-15).

Acts 6:13-14

They set up false witnesses who said, “This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.”

Acts 6:15

And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. [Moses: Exodus 24:29-30]

‘Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God’ (Acts 7:55).

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai his face radiated divine glory (see Exodus 34:29-30). So it is with Stephen.

Acts 7:1-2

Then the high priest asked him, 'Are these things so?' And Stephen replied: 'Gentlemen, brothers and fathers, listen to me.

Stephen addresses them as 'brothers' for he is a Jew and shares their faith and their history. He addresses them as 'fathers', respectfully acknowledging their authority.