

# Jerusalem

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

How did the community of believers respond to threats from without and from within?

Read Acts 3–5.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand the early believers' example of authentic and bold generosity.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The Holy Spirit emboldens believers to speak about Jesus and practice generosity in the face of increasing opposition.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

The Holy Spirit is God. In the Nicene Creed, we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life." And in the Athanasian Creed, we say, "What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has." One of the texts the church uses to anchor our affirmation of the Spirit's divinity is Acts 5:3–5, when Peter called Ananias's lie a lie to "the Holy Spirit" and therefore to "God." We take this as evidence that, even very shortly after Pentecost, apostles, like Peter, referred to the Holy Spirit as God.

### ✦ MEDITATE

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31).

## [GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

**QUESTION** *How do churches grow?*

**QUESTION** *How should churches respond to opposition?*

In Acts 3–5, Peter, along with John, commenced his ministry leadership in Jerusalem. It began nicely, with a healing followed by a stirring and popular speech in the temple. After all, that’s how Jesus’s ministry had started. Once the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove and He had spent time waiting in the wilderness, Jesus came out proclaiming a gospel of repentance and performing signs and wonders, garnering both support and opposition along the way.

The book of Acts differs in at least two ways. For one, the authority structure is significantly less clear. Peter responded to Jesus’s charge to “strengthen your brothers” by implementing decision-making mechanisms and speaking on behalf of the community. But as the community grew, we wonder what will happen next. We also see a community discerning how to welcome new members and begin a life on mission together. As they did, we’ll read about some beautiful instances of bold generosity as well as a disturbing instance of deceptive generosity.

## ✦ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Acts 3 tells the story of Peter healing a lame man, reincorporating him into the worshipping congregation, and taking the opportunity to proclaim Jesus as the source of salvation. Acts 4 tells the story of the apostles’ first obstacle, a cease-and-desist order from the rulers of the religious establishment. We’ll read both how Peter responded to the high priest and how the believers responded to the story Peter told them when he got back. Acts 5 tells the church’s first “fall” narrative, the story of Ananias and Sapphira’s attempt to deceive the church. In the latter half of the chapter, we’ll read about the escalating conflict between the apostles and the authorities.

1. *Peter’s ministry*
2. *Trouble without*
3. *Trouble within*

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 3–5.

## *1. Peter's ministry*

### **+ READ ACTS 3**

**QUESTION** *What did Peter and John do for the lame man? How did Luke conclude the story?*

**QUESTION** *What new language did Peter use to describe the death and resurrection of Jesus?*

Acts 3 tells the first two accounts of Peter's post-Pentecost ministry in Jerusalem. They're two happy ones: a healing story (vv. 1–10) and an account of another of his sermons, or proclamations (vv. 11–26).

The setting for this first healing story is Peter's attendance of "the prayers" in the middle of the afternoon (v. 1; cf. 2:42) at what we might call a 3:00 p.m. service. When they arrived at "the Beautiful Gate," the gate that divided the outer and inner courts of the temple, they met a man who was customarily brought there by his friends to beg for alms (v. 2). Giving alms at the temple was a common Jewish practice at this time (see Psalm 112:9), so begging for alms here would have been both normal and socially acceptable (v. 3).

The first gift Peter gave the man was the gift of mutual attention (vv. 4–5). Peter "directed his gaze" at him, and the man "fixed his attention" at them. Peter's response in verse 6 has become an iconic memory of the church, reminding us that whether or not we have the material means to change someone's life, we always have the ability to give our attention and speak a word of encouragement or prayer. But Peter also had the miraculous ability to proclaim the man healed.

Luke then recorded that the man "entered the temple with them" (v. 8). While he would have been invited to beg for alms, he would not have been admitted into the inner courts of the temple, according to a legalistic (over-)interpretation of 2 Samuel 5:8 by some influential rabbis. This healing also recalls the time Jesus healed the lame in the Jerusalem temple during the final week of His life (cf. Matthew 21:14). While it is unequivocally good news that the man was healed of his physical disability, Luke continued the good report by pointing out that the man was made able to join the company of believers who had come to praise God together (vv. 8–9; cf. 2:42). And this was good for those believers too. When they saw him

healed, they recognized him and “were filled with wonder and amazement,” which only strengthened their own faith (v. 10).

For the second time, Peter responded to the people’s amazement at these “signs and wonders” by proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus from several passages from the Scriptures (vv. 11–26). He began his proclamation by attributing this healing to the power of God and specifying that this God—their God—had “glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied” (vv. 12–13). Again, Peter pointed a finger at the men in the temple and said, “You killed the Author of life” (vv. 14–15). Although he didn’t mince words, he still extended a word of forgiveness—“I know that you acted in ignorance”—that echoes Jesus’s words from the cross, “They know not what they do” (v. 17; Luke 23:34). After all, Peter had denied Jesus too and had stood in the same need of repentance and forgiveness as these people.

At this point, Peter made the same exhortation he had made in his previous proclamation: “Repent” (v. 19). His message follows the same logic as Isaiah 58:1–12. In that passage, the Lord promised that when His people pursued His righteousness with generosity and justice, their “healing [would] spring up speedily” (v. 8). Here, Peter said their repentance would be followed by “times of refreshing” and the return of Jesus (v. 20). Jesus will remain in heaven “until the time for restoring all the things” (v. 21). It seems Peter had two hopeful futures in view: an immediate future of refreshment and a distant future of restoration.

Peter finished his sermon by bringing up two passages of Scripture from either end of *Torah*, Deuteronomy 18:15–19 and Genesis 12:3. In the first passage, Moses prophesied the future rise of a special Jewish prophet, whom Peter identified as Jesus (vv. 22–24). By referencing the second passage, Peter reminded the people in Jerusalem of God’s commitment to His promise to Abram, to bless his family in order to bless the whole world. He pointed out that “God ... sent him [Jesus] to you first, to bless you *by turning every one of you from your wickedness*” (vv. 25–26). If God blesses His people by turning them from their wickedness, then the exhortation to “repent” (v. 19) makes perfect sense.

**QUESTION** *How do you think Luke wanted his readers to think about the purpose and possibility of miracles?*

**QUESTION** *According to Peter’s proclamation, why should people repent?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / First, we should recognize that miracles serve a greater purpose than physical healing. To be clear, the New Testament emphasizes the importance of improving the material conditions of the poor through concrete acts of generosity. Remember Acts 2:45; and also consider Galatians 2:9–

10 and James 2:15–16. However, Luke draws our attention to the man’s restoration to the worshipping fellowship—his ability to attend “the prayers”—and the way his healing enriched both his joy and faith and the joy and faith of the other believers. We should ask God for healing and “times of refreshing” but desire that everyone might enjoy full participation in the congregation of God’s people.

Second, we should recognize repentance as the pathway to spiritual refreshment. Peter’s call to repentance in verse 19 is neither guilt-mongering nor navel-gazing; it was opening the door to “times of refreshing” from God’s presence. When we acknowledge our sins and wickedness and turn from them to God, we enjoy peace, purpose, and joy in His presence and in the community of believers. Repentance has a way of strengthening our ankles from the sin that leaves our bones broken (v. 7; Psalm 51:8).

**QUESTION** *How has God worked in your life in ways that welcomed you into more joyful participation in the congregation of the faithful, whether it was through a physical miracle or not?*

**QUESTION** *What makes an invitation to repentance a blessing?*

## 2. Trouble without

### ✚ READ ACTS 4

**QUESTION** *Why did the rulers of the temple arrest Peter and John?*

**QUESTION** *What is the nature of the conflict in verses 1–22?*

Acts 4 recounts the fallout of Peter and John’s healing of the lame man in Acts 3. It begins with their arrest and the defense they gave before the Sanhedrin (vv. 1–22) and then shifts to the response of the other believers, namely, their prayer (vv. 23–31) and their increased commitment to generosity (vv. 32–37).

The trial appears to have been an honest one. The healing had, after all, taken place within the temple grounds, and it was the provenance of the temple rulers—the high priest and the high-priestly family—to be “annoyed” by this unexpected display of power and conduct a formal investigation.

The way Luke tells the story, the temple leaders were annoyed that these men had entered the temple and begun teaching about Jesus and proclaiming His resurrection (vv. 1–2). Peter and John were held in custody, though many believed their words (vv. 3–4). The examiners got straight to the point: You invoked a power; what was it? (vv. 5–7). Peter’s response consists of four movements. First, he raised the point that the investigation was “concerning a good deed done to a crippled man,” implying that good deeds should need no justification (vv. 8–9). Second, he answered the question plainly: It was “by the name of Jesus Christ” (v. 10–11a). Third, he repeated his common refrain, reminding the leaders that “you crucified” him (v. 10; cf. 2:23, 36; 3:15). Finally, Peter said salvation is only in the name of this Jesus (v. 12).

Having heard Peter’s testimony, the rulers “were astonished” and “recognized that they had been with Jesus” (v. 13–14). To their credit, they took Peter’s critique (“We are being examined today concerning a good deed done,” vv. 8–9) to heart and let them go. Peter’s defense, however, hadn’t assuaged their deeper concern, the emergence of an undeniable and popular power creating converts at their temple (vv. 15–17). Leveraging their spiritual authority, they “charged” Peter and John not to speak in Jesus’s name (v. 18). Peter and John responded by appealing to their right to spiritual integrity, saying they must speak of what they had seen or heard from God (vv. 19–20). Since this miracle had been so well received and because people were praising God for it, the rulers levied a few more threats and let them go again (vv. 21–22).

Peter and John returned to the community with a story to tell (vv. 23). Far from tempering the believers’ enthusiasm, this episode only emboldened them. The believers, who had made a lifelong practice of singing the psalms at “the prayers,” were reminded of the opening words of Psalm 2. They didn’t so much interpret Psalm 2 as they used it to interpret what had just happened to Peter and John (vv. 24–28). Emboldened by this reading, they asked God for greater boldness to speak and for more signs and wonders to be performed in the name of Jesus (vv. 29–30). God responded to their prayer both by giving them the boldness they asked for and by “shaking” the place where they were gathered (v. 31). Whether Luke was describing a physical earthquake, a spiritual sensation, or social upheaval, we don’t know. It appears as if he was inviting his readers to use their imagination.

Acts 4:32–37 resembles Acts 2:43–47. In both passages, Luke points to the believers holding all things in common and meeting one another’s needs through charitable distributions (2:44–45; 4:32, 34–35). In this later passage, Luke adds that the apostles were not just “teaching” but giving their testimony with great power (v. 33), and he briefly introduces a new figure named Barnabas (vv. 36–37). Barnabas features more prominently in Acts 9–15, but Luke introduces him here partly to transition to the story he’ll tell in Acts 5. For now, Barnabas participated in the practice of holding all things in common by selling some of his land and bringing the money to the apostles for the distribution (v. 37). His act recalls Jesus’s words to Peter about leaving houses and lands for the sake of Jesus’s name (Matthew 19:27–29).

**QUESTION** *How did Peter defend himself to the rulers of the temple?*

**QUESTION** *How did the believers interpret what happened to Peter and John at the temple?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / First, we should respond to opposition with generosity. The early believers didn't respond to this first expression of resistance by hedging their bets; rather, they doubled down on their generosity. Barnabas even sold off his land because he believed the community of believers was a better investment. The boldness to speak is one thing, but the boldness to go "all in" in our pursuit of the kingdom of heaven is something else. When we face opposition of any kind, we should respond by increasing our generosity.

Second, we should pray the psalms to make sense of our circumstances. The psalms aren't the only prayers out there, but they were the prayerbook of the early church. In circumstances of every kind, they were able to articulate their struggles and their triumphs in the words of the prophets, kings, and musicians who had gone before them. The death and resurrection of Jesus didn't obscure the psalms but only unlocked new interpretations and deeper meanings. Consider incorporating the psalms into your regular prayer life and praying through them to understand the conflicts you find yourself experiencing.

**QUESTION** *What is the value of doubling down on generosity when the going gets tough?*

**QUESTION** *What would it look like for you to engage the psalms more deeply in your prayer life?*

### *3. Trouble within*

#### **✚ READ ACTS 5**

**QUESTION** *What exactly was Ananias and Sapphira's sin?*

**QUESTION** *How did Peter and John continue to show their "boldness" in this chapter?*

Every time the Scriptures describe the people of God experiencing a glorious new beginning, there's a "fall" narrative that serves as a warning. In Eden, it was Adam and Eve transgressing God's boundaries, hiding from Him, and shifting the blame (Genesis 3). After the flood, it was Ham behaving extremely disrespectfully and inappropriately toward his father (Genesis 9). After their deliverance from Egypt, it was the Israelites' idolatrous creation of a golden calf (Exodus 32). In the tabernacle, it was Nadab and Abihu ignoring their instructions and offering unauthorized incense (Leviticus 10). In Acts 5, Barnabas's act of generosity was immediately followed by the duplicitous and deceptive act of false generosity by Ananias and Sapphira (vv. 1–11). Their story is followed by more signs and wonders (vv. 12–16) and then another trial (vv. 17–42).

Like Barnabas, a man named Ananias sold a piece of land (v. 1). Conspiring with his wife, he presented some of the sales revenue as if it were the whole in an attempt to appear more generous than he was (v. 2). Peter interpreted this act of duplicity as a "lie to the Holy Spirit" (vv. 3–5). Peter reminded him he was under no compulsion to sell the land in the first place; all of this was his choice. And Ananias died on the spot (vv. 5–6). When his wife, Sapphira, came in, Peter gave her an opportunity to tell the truth, reminiscent of God coming to Adam and Eve in the garden (vv. 7–8). Rather than confess, she stuck to her husband's story and died the same way (vv. 9–10). As with the death of Ananias (v. 5b), the death of Sapphira inspired fear (v. 11). The focus of the story is not duplicity and deceit writ large but specifically *lying to the Holy Spirit* (vv. 3–5, 9). What does it mean to lie to the Holy Spirit? This story doesn't provide a strict definition, but we can point to some clues. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the church; they sought approval from the Spirit-filled community and pretended to participate in the Spirit-inspired work of generosity.

The phrase "many signs and wonders" serves as a transition as Luke zooms out from this "fall" narrative to the broader story (vv. 12–16). Despite Ananias and Sapphira's sin, the community of believers grew. As they grew, their capacity to heal also grew, and people traveled from all over to see what was going on.

In verses 17–42, Luke recounts the next chapter of the conflict between Peter and John and the high priest. Having recently been "greatly annoyed," the rulers of the temple were now "filled with jealousy" and threw the men in prison (vv. 17–18). Without a struggle, an angel released the men and commissioned them to teach (vv. 19–20). Rather than seek their own escape, they simply returned to the first place they had gotten into trouble and continued teaching about Jesus (v. 21a). When the high priest summoned them for trial and the guards couldn't find them, someone tipped them off that Peter and John were in the temple (vv. 21b–26). In verses 27–32, the council questioned them, and they responded. Not only had they disobeyed the high priest's charge, but they also criticized them for killing Jesus (vv. 27–28). In Peter's response, he continued to refer to Jesus as the one "whom you killed" but whom "God exalted" and identified himself as a witness of all this (vv. 29–32).



This left the council “enraged” (v. 33), only to be pacified by the revered teacher, Gamaliel (vv. 34–39), who reasoned with the council as follows: first, he framed his advice by telling the “enraged” council to be careful (v. 35). Then, he reminded them of the religious movements led by Theudas (v. 36) and Judas (v. 37), neither of which amounted to anything. If this new religious movement, founded by Jesus and continued by the apostles, were a human effort, it would end with a whimper just like the previous ones (v. 38). It was in their best interest to let it fizzle out because, if they had judged wrongly, and this were a movement of God, then they’d find themselves having opposed God (v. 39). Agreeing with Gamaliel, the council increased the men’s punishment, beating them, and repeating their “charge” to cease and desist (v. 40). This only encouraged the men, who rejoiced and counted these punishments an honor. And they went on teaching and preaching as before (vv. 41–42).

**QUESTION** *How does Ananias’s brazenness compare to the apostles’ boldness?*

**QUESTION** *What do you make of Gamaliel’s advice?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / First, we should cultivate spiritual honesty. Ananias and Sapphira’s story warns us against pretending to be more generous or spiritual than we really are. They desired to *appear* holy without actually *becoming* holy. They sought recognition instead of transformation. Their story challenges us to ask ourselves how much we really want to be made holy and how much we are seeking to benefit from our participation in Christian community. We should strive to be honest before God and others.

Second, we should follow Gamaliel’s example of testing whether a work is from God. Just like the chief priests and Pharisees prematurely judged Jesus as being a blasphemer, so the council had prematurely judged Peter and John for putting Jesus’s death on their heads. Gamaliel wasn’t swept away by religious fervor but kept his cool and allowed this movement to play out. As a faithful Jew, He knew God would confirm the words of His prophets by bringing forth good fruit from them. Like Gamaliel, we can patiently watch the movements and works that spring up around us, paying attention to evidence of spiritual fruit.

**QUESTION** *What are some ways we might be tempted to present a more spiritual or generous image than is true?*

**QUESTION** *How can we discern whether a spiritual movement or work is truly from God? What signs of spiritual fruit should we look for?*

## [NEXT STEPS]

These chapters urge us to double down on the practice of generosity, even in the face of opposition. Why should we do this? First, it's hard to imagine a more spiritual practice than attuning ourselves to the needs of those around us and sacrificing our own resources to meet those needs. This builds up the church in love. Second, generosity is an act of repentance, helping us disentangle ourselves from a crooked generation. Finally, authentic generosity is the only antidote to the temptation of false generosity—trying to appear better than we are. For all these reasons, commit yourself this week to following the apostolic pattern of true and bold generosity.

## [PRAY]

+Use this prayer as a guide to pray through these passages this week.

*Almighty and Everlasting God, who through signs and wonders confirmed the witness of your apostles and called many to repentance: Grant us boldness to proclaim the name of Jesus Christ that we may walk in your truth, offer ourselves with integrity and bear faithful witness to your mighty works. Strengthen our hearts by the power of your Holy Spirit that we may rejoice in suffering for the sake of the gospel and trust in your sovereign hand, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*