

## JESUS, OUR LEADER AND SAVIOR

Acts 5:17–42

Key Verses: 5:31–32

“God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance 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.”

What kind of spirit do you have? Some people seem laid back and easygoing. Some are ambitious for their own goals. Some have a party spirit. Some even have the spirit of rebellion. But what kind of spirit should Christians have? Today’s passage concludes this second section of Acts (chs. 3–5). In these chapters Peter and the apostles are arrested, put on trial, jailed, threatened, ordered to be quiet, and even beaten. But nothing and no one can stop what God is doing through them. In the midst of it all, they don’t focus on themselves; they’re constantly pointing to Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Today’s passage is dramatic. But what stands out most is the spirit of the apostles. Even as their lives are threatened, they refuse to be intimidated. We want to think about what it really means that Jesus is our Leader and Savior. And we want to learn from their spirit how we can be his witnesses today. May God speak to us through his word.

In verses 12–16 Luke describes the ministry of the apostles. By their hand, many signs and wonders were regularly being done. More than ever, believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. People were even carrying out the sick into the streets, so that at least Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them. People were gathering from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and afflicted to be healed. It was beautiful.

Look at verses 17–18. “But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.” They’re jealous? Why? Because they think the apostles are a threat to their own power. They imprison them to publicly exercise authority over them and shame them. Look at verses 19–20. “But during the night, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ‘Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.’” “This Life” is not just physical existence or survival, but real life. Through “all the words of this Life,” people experience repentance that leads

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<sup>1</sup> 3:6,13–16,18,20,22; 4:10–12,27,33; 5:30–31,42.

to life (11:18). The words of God lead to eternal life (13:46,48). Jesus himself is the source of this life (3:15). His words are still the words of eternal life (John 6:68). In sending his Son, God himself is on mission to save us and give us life.

But it's a frightening time for the apostles. Now it's not only Peter and John but all of them who've been arrested. Their movement seems on the verge of being snuffed out. After getting out of prison, many people might scurry away and go into hiding. What do these men do? Read verse 21a. "And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach." They hold onto the word of God, take courage, go right back into the public, and obey boldly.

Next, the author describes the comical embarrassment of the religious leaders (21b–26). They assume they have the apostles where they can control and intimidate them, behind securely locked prison doors with guards standing there. But when they send for them, they're gone! When these leaders hear of it, they're greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this will come to (24). Then someone comes and says, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people" (25). They send the captain with officers to bring the apostles in, but not by force, for they're afraid of being stoned by the people (26). In contrast to the apostles, these "leaders" are cowards.

Still, they're desperately trying to intimidate them. They set the apostles before the council and have the high priest question them: "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us" (27–28). They can't even bring themselves to say his name, Jesus. And the fact is, their hands are dripping with the guilt of shedding his blood. Yet, they're only thinking about their own honor and positions. And they're trying to force the apostles to obey them.

What happens? Look at verse 29. "But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men.'" In verse 32 Peter repeats this word "obey." Rarely used in the Bible, in Greek it's a compound word that literally means "obey the leader" (*peitharchein*).<sup>2</sup> In a moment, Peter is going to say which "Leader" he's talking about. The Bible tells all Christians to be subject to the governing authorities (Rom.13:1–7). But that's only when what these authorities tell us to do, or not do, doesn't contradict what God tells us to do. To be witnesses of Jesus, we need to obey our Leader Jesus, first and foremost.

Peter's words here are his shortest message thus far. He's already told these rulers to repent of what they did to Jesus (4:10–11); now he's telling them for the last time. Look at verse 30. "The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom

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<sup>2</sup> This compound word is found only in Acts 5:29,32, 27:21 and Titus 3:1–2.

you killed by hanging him on a tree.” They tried to deflect, but Peter won’t let them off the hook for the death of Jesus. The words “by hanging him on a tree” show how they tried to make Jesus look cursed by God.<sup>3</sup> They despised him as nothing but a lowly Galilean from Nazareth, the son of a carpenter. But all their efforts to oppress, suppress and defame his name backfired. Read verse 31. “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” God totally undid what they did: they humiliated Jesus to the maximum degree, but God exalted Jesus to the highest place. Yet, it was not for revenge. God is offering even these wicked men one more chance to repent and be forgiven. Exalted to the right hand of God, only Jesus can give repentance and forgiveness of sins to anyone who repents and believes. Even now, his grace is still for the worst of sinners (1 Tim.1:15–16).

Read verse 31a again. “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior.” Here, the Greek word for “Leader” is the other half of that compound word for “obey.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus is the true “Leader,” not this council. In other places the Bible uses this word “Leader” to describe Jesus, where it’s translated as “Author” (Acts 3:15), “founder” (Heb.12:2) or “beginning” (Col.1:18). In Revelation Jesus is described as “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation” (Rev.3:14b). Jesus is both “the beginning” and the “true witness.” As the one who began all creation, our Leader Jesus is “the true witness.” He came to this world “to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37b). Jesus, our Author of life, our founder, our beginning, is the first true witness. And it wasn’t meant to stop with him. Acts is all about being true witnesses about Jesus and like Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

As our Leader, Jesus witnessed to the truth even while enduring great suffering. When he was arrested, the men who held him in custody were mocking him as they beat him (Luke 22:63). After receiving lashes from a whip all over his body, he stood bloodied and humiliated before this same council. They asked, “If you are the Christ, tell us.” He said, “If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (Luke 22:67–69). Not long after that, before Pontius Pilate he again “made the good confession” (1 Tim.6:13). No amount of threats from earthly powers could intimidate him. The Bible tells us that we have countless brothers and sisters in history, from all over the world, who conquered “by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev.12:11). These precious servants of the living God gave their testimony to the truth about Jesus with what has been called “the spirit of martyrdom.”

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Deut.21:23; Gal.3:13.

<sup>4</sup> In Greek, “Leader” is “Archegon”; obey is “peitharchein.”

<sup>5</sup> 1:8,22; 2:32,40; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39,41,43; 13:31; 14:3; 15:8; 22:15,20; 26:16.

When Peter first confessed him as the Christ of God, Jesus told his disciples, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.’ And he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels” (Luke 9:20–26). Through his suffering and death, our Lord Jesus set the example of the spirit of martyrdom. He asks all who profess to believe in him to follow him in this.

During the first centuries of the Roman Empire, Christians were subjected to mob violence, imprisoned, and exiled. Churches were burned, Scriptures confiscated, and pastors tortured and executed. Today, such treatment of Christians continues in places like North Korea, Somalia, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Iran, Afghanistan, and India, to name a few.<sup>6</sup> Faithful believers around the world today are really suffering for their faith in Jesus. Hebrews 12:1–3 is still urging us: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

We are his witnesses not just at epic moments, but in daily self-denial. We are his witnesses when we take up our own cross, sacrifice for his sake, and follow him in obedience. More than our words, it’s our life example that influences those around us. Frankly, we live in selfish times. It’s even taught as absolute truth that we need to prioritize ourselves. Society tells us, “Take care of yourself! Be your best self! Fulfill yourself!” But our Leader Jesus tells us, “Deny yourself; carry your own cross daily; sacrifice yourself; follow me.” Are we listening to him?

In verse 31 Peter adds that Jesus is our Savior. As we share our faith in him, even while facing hostility and rejection, he saves us. He may not save us from our human problems and sufferings. He may not save us from arrest, prison, beating, or even death. But he saves us from the power of sin and death, and all kinds of condemnation. The Bible says that one day, by his grace, he will share his glory with us in his eternal kingdom.<sup>7</sup> That’s true salvation.

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in “Open Doors: The 2024 World Watch List” at [opendoorsus.org](http://opendoorsus.org).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Rom.5:2; 8:18; 1 Cor.15:43; 2 Cor.4:17; Col.1:27; 3:4; 1 Thess.2:12; 2 Thess.2:14; 1 Pet.5:5,10.

Read verse 32. “And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” God the Father planned this mission in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, God the Son carried it out. Now, God the Spirit continues this mission through his people today. The Holy Spirit is still the living witness to Jesus. Jesus calls him “the Helper” who convicts the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. He’s “the Spirit of truth” who guides us into all the truth. His main work is to glorify Jesus and to make his glory known to us (John 16:7–14). The only way to be real witnesses of Jesus is to be full of the Holy Spirit. It happens if we obey Jesus, our Leader.

How do the religious leaders respond? Look at verse 33. “When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.” “Enraged” literally means “sawed into two.” It’s a metaphor for bursting open with anger. Soon, these leaders are going to respond to Stephen in the same way (7:54). The clear gospel always infuriates those too proud to repent. But we should not fear.

In verses 34–39 a Pharisee named Gamaliel calls for a private meeting and advises the group to leave the apostles alone; otherwise, they may find themselves opposing God himself. By God’s grace, they listen to this respected man and step away from killing the apostles. Instead, in verse 40 they beat them, charge them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. This “beating” is actually the 40 lashes minus one. It’s the same beating they gave our Lord. It’s the first time the apostles actually endure physical suffering for his sake. Though they are released, their bodies are badly bloodied and full of wounds.

How do they respond? Read verse 41. “Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.” What a different Peter this is from the one who denied Jesus before a servant girl! They treat this beating as a badge of honor, a privilege. In this, they set a precedent for all believers of all time (cf. 16:22–25). Later, Peter writes: “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Pet.4:13). And the apostles don’t just rejoice. Read verse 42. “And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.” Imagine what it would be like to have the apostles, covered in bloody bandages, showing up at your house to talk about Jesus. Despite their wounds and the continuing threat, they would not quit. They urgently want people to know Jesus. It’s deeply moving.

Today we thought about what it means that Jesus is our Leader. Read verses 31–32 again. May God forgive us for giving in to the world and living with the wrong kind of spirit. May God help us obey Jesus our Leader and Savior and

fill us with the Holy Spirit, that we may live as his witnesses, with the spirit of martyrdom, in this lost generation.