



Obeying the Holy Spirit

(Acts 5:17-42)

Notes: Week Twelve

Acts 5:17-42 (NIV)

The Apostles Persecuted

¹⁷ Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ²⁰ “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.”

²¹ At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. ²² But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, ²³ “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” ²⁴ On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to.

²⁵ Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.” ²⁶ At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

²⁷ The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸ “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

³³ When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. ³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. ³⁵ Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to

be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing.³⁷ After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.³⁸ Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail.³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

⁴⁰ His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

⁴¹ The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. ⁴² Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

Acts 5:17-42 (HCSB)

In and Out of Prison

¹⁷ Then the high priest took action. He and all his colleagues, those who belonged to the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ So they arrested^[a] the apostles and put them in the city jail. ¹⁹ But an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail during the night, brought them out, and said, ²⁰ “Go and stand in the temple complex, and tell the people all about this life.” ²¹ In obedience to this, they entered the temple complex at daybreak and began to teach.

The Apostles on Trial Again

When the high priest and those who were with him arrived, they convened the Sanhedrin—the full Senate of the sons of Israel—and sent orders to the jail to have them brought. ²² But when the temple police got there, they did not find them in the jail, so they returned and reported, ²³ “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing in front of the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside!” ²⁴ As^[b] the commander of the temple police and the chief priests heard these things, they were baffled about them, as to what could come of this.

²⁵ Someone came and reported to them, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple complex and teaching the people.” ²⁶ Then the commander went with the temple police and brought them in without force, because they were afraid the people might stone them. ²⁷ After they brought them in, they had them stand before the Sanhedrin, and the high priest asked, ²⁸ “Didn’t we strictly order you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to bring this man’s blood on us!”

²⁹ But Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had murdered by hanging Him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted this man to His right hand as ruler and Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

Gamaliel's Advice

³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. ³⁴ A Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was respected by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered the men^[c] to be taken outside for a little while. ³⁵ He said to them, “Men of Israel, be careful about what you’re going to do to these men. ³⁶ Not long ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about 400 men rallied to him. He was killed, and all his partisans were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After this man, Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and attracted a following.^[d] That man also perished, and all his partisans were scattered. ³⁸ And now, I tell you, stay away from these men and leave them alone. For if this plan or this work is of men, it will be overthrown; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even be found fighting against God.” So they were persuaded by him. ⁴⁰ After they called in the apostles and had them flogged, they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. ⁴¹ Then they went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be dishonored on behalf of the Name.^[e] ⁴² Every day in the temple complex, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 5:18](#) Lit *laid hands on*
- b. [Acts 5:24](#) Other mss add *the high priest and*
- c. [Acts 5:34](#) Other mss read *apostles*
- d. [Acts 5:37](#) Lit *and drew people after him*
- e. [Acts 5:41](#) Other mss add *of Jesus, or of Christ*

Holman Christian Standard Bible - Study Bible¹

Acts 5:17-42

5:17 The **high priest** and his **colleagues** opposed the spread of Christianity not merely because they didn't believe in Jesus as Messiah, but because they were **filled with jealousy** at the following that was building around Him daily as the apostles preached and performed miracles.

5:19-20 Having been arrested again for their ministry in Jesus' name ([v. 18](#)), the apostles were set free by **an angel of the Lord** in such a way that aroused no attention. Some speculate that they were transported directly from the jail to the **temple complex**, but the fact that the angel **opened the doors of the jail** and told the apostles to **Go and stand** in the temple suggests otherwise. See [12:6-10](#) and note there for a similar episode.

5:21a Newly freed, we might expect the apostles to flee Jerusalem. Instead, they went to the **temple complex at daybreak** and began to do the very thing that had gotten them in trouble in the first place: teach about Jesus.

5:21b-23 The **Sanhedrin** convened in the morning, intent on taking decisive action to halt the growth of Christian faith. That the **temple police** found **the jail securely locked** and the **guards** standing duty proves that the jailbreak was both miraculous and secretive.

5:26 The temple police **were afraid the people might stone them** because Jerusalem was responding positively to the apostles. Meanwhile, the Jewish leaders saw their authority slipping away.

5:28 The Jewish leaders feared that the people would hold them responsible for Jesus' death. They were more concerned about maintaining their authority than embracing the truth.

5:29 Christians should obey the law of the land, but when human law conflicts with God's law, we must obey **God rather than men**.

5:30-32 If anything, Peter stepped up the pressure on the Sanhedrin (and endangered himself and the others more) by declaring that they had **murdered** Jesus, whom **God exalted... to His right hand as ruler and Savior**. Peter and the other apostles knew this to be true because they were **witnesses** of this, as was **the Holy Spirit**.

5:33-34 If the Jewish leaders had been willing to kill Jesus, much more were they prepared to **kill** the apostles, whose stubborn testimony was serving to prolong the Jesus controversy. But **Gamaliel** wisely cooled their rage. This was Gamaliel I, the teacher of Paul the apostle ([22:3](#)). It is uncertain whether he was the successor to the great rabbinic teacher Hillel or whether he founded his own school. In either case, he became a major rabbinic teacher. His conciliatory stance toward the apostles is consistent with what is known of his temperate attitude elsewhere.

5:36 Josephus, the Jewish historian, reported that many revolts against Roman rule occurred during the time of Jesus—some of them even having messianic overtones. He mentions a person named Theudas, who came after Judas the Galilean ([v. 37](#)). This is probably not the same person as the **Theudas** referred to here.

1. Jeremy Royal Howard, ed., *HCSB Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2010), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Acts 5".

5:37 **Judas the Galilean**, or Judas of Gamala, rebelled against the census that Quirinius took in A.D. 6. He was mentioned by Josephus as teaching that the Israelites were not to give tribute to pagan rulers. His revolt ended in defeat.

5:39 Gamaliel's advice reflected the Pharisees' belief that if **God** has ordained a thing, it will come to pass. Thus Gamaliel felt it was prudent for the Sanhedrin to step back and see what God would do with the Christian movement.

5:41 Some people believe that suffering and hardships are signs that we are not in God's will. Contrast this with the apostles, who, after being flogged, went out of **the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing** that they had been considered **worthy** to be **dishonored** on Christ's behalf.

English Standard Version - Study Bible²

Acts 5:17-42

5:17-42 The Apostles Appear before the Council. Just as Peter's healing of the lame man provoked a trial before the Sanhedrin ([3:1-4:22](#)), once again the apostolic miracles precipitated a trial, this time of all the apostles.

5:17 filled with jealousy. These Sadducees were "jealous" not for God's honor or for the advancement of his kingdom but for retaining their own influence and power (this theme is repeated later; see [7:9](#); [13:45](#); [17:5](#); and note on [12:3](#)).

5:20 The words of this Life means the words of salvation and eternal life. It seems that early Christianity may also have been called "the Life," as well as "the Way" (see note on [9:1-2](#)).

5:21 It was **daybreak**, and a crowd would be gathering at the temple for the morning sacrifices. The **council and all the senate** are almost certainly two names for the same group, the Sanhedrin ("council" translates Gk. *synedrion*, "Sanhedrin").

5:30 hanging him on a tree. See note on [10:39](#). The allusion is to [Deut. 21:22-23](#).

5:33 On the Jews' pattern of resistance (cf. [7:51](#); [12:1-3](#); [13:45](#); [25:7](#); [28:24](#)), see note on [Amos 4:6](#).

5:34 The lone voice in the Sanhedrin to speak against an immediate death sentence was that of **Gamaliel**. He was the most prominent rabbi of his day and the teacher of Paul ([22:3](#)). He belonged to the Pharisaic minority on the Sanhedrin but had considerable influence.

5:36 Gamaliel cited two examples from Jewish history to support his basic argument that movements not backed by God always come to nothing. Both examples were failed movements, the first being that of a revolutionary named **Theudas**, and the second that of "Judas the Galilean" ([v. 37](#)), who is said to have come "after him." Judas the Galilean is well known, having led a tax revolt in A.D. 6 (Josephus, [Jewish Antiquities 18.23](#)), and this is evidently the person to whom Gamaliel is referring. Although there is no historical record of the "Theudas" mentioned here (other than this statement by Gamaliel), most likely this "Theudas" was one of many otherwise unknown leaders of such movements following the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C. Although Jewish historian Josephus (writing in A.D. 95 in [Jewish Antiquities 20.97](#)) mentions someone named "Theudas" who led a movement at a later date (A.D. 44-46), it is clear that Josephus's reference is to a different person, since the movement to which he refers occurred many years after the speech by Gamaliel (c. A.D. 30 or 33).

5:40 This time the Sanhedrin enforced their command by scourging the **apostles**. The text does not say whether it was with the maximum of 39 stripes prescribed by Jewish law (see [2 Cor. 11:24](#)) or with fewer stripes. The lashing consisted of striking the victim's bare skin with a tripled strip of calf's hide. The victim received two blows to the back, then one to the chest. Thus each cycle had to be divisible by three, which explains the maximum limit of 39—one less than the 40 prescribed in [Deut. 25:3](#).

5:41 The apostles left **rejoicing** at being considered **worthy to suffer** for their witness in Jesus' name, which they boldly resumed despite the Sanhedrin's threat. Their suffering paradoxically resulted in the growth of the church ([6:1](#)). Suffering for the name of Jesus is a characteristic theme in Acts.

2. Lane T. Dennis, ed., *ESV Study Bible, The: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Acts 5".

NLT Life Application Study Bible³

Acts 5:17-42

5:17, 18 The apostles experienced power to do miracles, great boldness in preaching, and God's presence in their lives; yet they were not free from hatred and persecution. They were arrested, put in jail, beaten, and slandered by community leaders. Faith in God does not make troubles disappear; it makes troubles appear less frightening because it puts them in the right perspective. Don't expect everyone to react favorably when you share something as dynamic as your faith in Christ. Some will be jealous, afraid, or threatened. Expect some negative reactions, and remember that you must be more concerned about serving God than about the reactions of people (see [5:29](#)).

5:19 The angel of the Lord gave the apostles a command that, when followed, would lead to a brutal flogging ([5:40](#)). If that strikes you as odd, it is probably because of the prevailing idea among many believers that obedience inevitably leads to blessing (defined as "a problem-free, blissful existence"). Serious students of the Bible know, however, that obeying God often results in pain and suffering. They also recognize that being persecuted for Christ is a deeper kind of blessing. What biblical commands, if obeyed, might result in discomfort for you today? Will you commit to live them out anyway?

5:21 Suppose someone threatened to kill you if you didn't stop talking about God. You might be tempted to keep quiet. But after being threatened by powerful leaders, arrested, jailed, and miraculously released, the apostles went back to preaching. This was nothing less than God's power working through them ([4:13](#))! When we are convinced of the truth of Christ's resurrection and have experienced the presence and power of his Holy Spirit, we will also have the confidence to speak out for Christ.

5:21 The Temple at daybreak was a busy place. Many people stopped at the Temple to pray and worship at sunrise. The apostles were already there, ready to tell them the Good News of new life in Jesus Christ. Also at daybreak, the 70 men of the high council (also called the Sanhedrin) were gathering, preparing to question the apostles. This was going to be no small trial. The religious leaders would do anything to stop these apostles from challenging their authority, threatening their secure position, and exposing their hypocritical motives to the people.

5:29 The apostles knew their priorities. While we should try to live at peace with everyone ([Romans 12:18](#)), conflict with the world and its authorities is sometimes inevitable for a Christian ([John 15:18](#)). There will be situations where you cannot obey both God and people. Then you must obey God and trust his Word. Let Jesus' words in [Luke 6:22](#) encourage you: "What blessings await you when people hate you and exclude you and mock you and curse you as evil because you follow the Son of Man."

5:34 The Pharisees were the other major party in the Jewish high council with the Sadducees ([5:17](#)). The Pharisees were the strict keepers of the law—not only God's law but hundreds of other rules they had added to God's law. They were careful about outward purity, but many had hearts full of impure motives. Jesus confronted the Pharisees often during his ministry on earth. Oddly enough, a Pharisee named Gamaliel became an unexpected ally for the apostles, although he probably did not support their teachings. He was a distinguished member of the high council and a teacher. While Gamaliel may have saved the apostles' lives, his real intentions probably were to prevent a division in the council and to avoid arousing the Romans. The apostles were popular among the people, and killing them might start a riot. Gamaliel's advice to the council gave the apostles some breathing room to continue their work. The council decided to wait, hoping that this would all fade away harmlessly. They couldn't have been more wrong. Ironically, Paul, later one of the greatest apostles, had been one of Gamaliel's students ([22:3](#)).

3. *Life Application Study Bible*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 1825-1826.

5:39 Gamaliel presented some sound advice about reacting to religious movements. Unless adherents in these groups endorse obviously dangerous doctrines or practices, it is often wiser to be tolerant rather than repressive. Sometimes only time will tell if they are presenting merely human ideas or if God is trying to say something through them. The next time a group promotes differing religious ideas, consider Gamaliel's advice, just in case you "find yourselves fighting against God."

5:40-42 Peter and John had been warned repeatedly not to preach, but they continued in spite of the threats. We, too, should live as Christ has asked us to, sharing our faith no matter what the cost. We may not be beaten or thrown in jail, but we may be ridiculed, ostracized, or slandered. To what extent are you willing to suffer for the sake of sharing the Good News with others?

5:41 Have you ever thought of persecution as a blessing, as something worth rejoicing about? This beating suffered by Peter and John was the first time any of the apostles had been physically abused for their faith. These men knew how Jesus had suffered, and they praised God that he had allowed them to be persecuted like their Lord. If you are mocked or persecuted for your faith, it isn't because you're doing something wrong but because God has counted you "worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus."

5:42 Home Bible studies are not new. As the believers needed to grow in their new faith, home Bible studies met their needs, as well as serving as a means to introduce new people to the Christian faith. During later times of persecution, meeting in homes became the primary method of passing on Bible knowledge. Christians throughout the world still use this approach when under persecution and as a way to build up believers.