

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY

PART FIVE - CHAPTERS 4 AND 5

We do not know how many days or weeks passed between the day of Pentecost and the beginning of chapter 4. It was a period of explosive growth in the church which was unopposed. The religious leaders seemed for the moment stunned by the sheer speed and size of what was happening. Eventually they do react by arresting the two leaders of the new movement. Their reasons for doing so are summed up in chapter 4:2.

THEY - not the experts, were TEACHING - not entertaining or organising, the PEOPLE - not just their own little group of insiders, and PROCLAIMING - not apologising, in JESUS - not their pastor, church building, denomination or special customs, the RESURRECTION - not just the crucifixion.

These six reasons have remained the secret of dynamic growth in the church ever since - and the triggers for persecution.

Peter and John, two uncultured fishermen, instead of being overawed by their learned, sophisticated judges gave a simple, compelling answer which came through their lives as well as their mouths because Jesus Christ lived in them. (4:8-14)

The council's cunning plan to stop the growth of the Christian church was to have them keep quiet about Jesus. They were free to continue doing all the good works they wanted to. The plan failed because the inner compulsion of the Spirit of Jesus to speak of Him mattered so much more than their comfort or freedom. (4:15-22)

Once released Peter and John went straight to the other Christians for a prayer meeting. They shared the situation and two Psalms. The first, Psalm 146, recalled that God was the Creator and could set prisoners free. (Ps.146:6,7) The second, Psalm 2, anticipated opposition to Christ and pointed out how laughable it was for puny men, even if they were big in their society, to oppose their Creator. They applied these scriptures to their situation so that the whole group felt tremendously confident that their Creator, through them, could handle the opposition. Persecution of two leaders led to renewed courage for thousands of Christians. (4:23-31)

New confidence in their witness was accompanied by new confidence that they need not keep a tight grip on their possessions. What they said met spiritual needs; what they did met material needs. (4:32-35)

Out of this renewal arose a new leader, Joseph, nicknamed Barnabas, who would play a key role in the rest of Acts. He gave encouragement with his mouth and his cheque book. (4:36,37)

Chapter 5 records an attack on the church of a new kind - from within. The Devil's plan A - have them concentrate on good works but keep quiet about Jesus - had failed. Plan B was now put into operation.

5:1-10 Q.1 What was Ananias' and Sapphira's sin? Was it that they did not give all their possessions to the church? How do we today make the same mistake they did?

5:1-10 Q.2 Why did God deal with them so severely? What was the Devil's real purpose in putting them up to this scheme? What was plan B? What would have been its effect had it worked? What happens when the same plan works today?

5:1-10 Q.3 'Why has Satan filled your heart?', Peter asked.(5:3) What is the only other occasion in the Bible when Satan himself is described as entering a person?(Jn.13:27) What was the similarity between that occasion and this one?

5:11 Q.4 How does this verse show how necessary it was for God to withdraw His gift of life from Ananias and Sapphira? Were they Christians? Could this be an example of Matt.12:31,32? What might be the effect if God were to act in the same way today? Why doesn't He?

5:12-16 Q.6 What six consequences of the church's fear of God are described in these verses? What would be their modern day equivalent? What is the normal way of bringing about a fear of God in the church?

5:17,18 Q.6 Compare chapter 5:17 and 5:3 with 4:8 and 4:31. How is one situation a reaction to the other? How should we respond to jealousy from religious people?

5:19-25 Q.7 How did God's intervention on this occasion give greater opportunity for the gospel? Did it make life easier for the apostles? Can we expect God to intervene to change circumstances in our times of persecution?

5:26-28 Q.8 The council's accusation against the apostles in verse 28 contains a remarkable testimony to the effectiveness of their outreach. What was it? Could the same thing be said about our town or city? If not, why not?

5:29-32 Q.9 What was the emphasis in Peter's message this time? How was it so appropriate for his audience?

5:33-42 Q.10 What was Gamaliel's argument against further persecution? Was he right? What else do we know about Gamaliel?(Acts 22:3) Was God working through his life? How does the state system sometimes work for us also? What was the apostles' reaction to their release? What further glimpse does it give us into why the church in Jerusalem was so effective?