

When the Spirit Moves, You Shall Be Witnesses  
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Sometimes when we work through scripture the way our church does, trying to teach long sections of scripture and making sure that's what we're looking at and dealing with as a church, sometimes we move really slow. And we examine individual words and phrases; we get very analytical with it. There's been times...I remember one time we spent almost five weeks on one paragraph in the New Testament. And sometimes you go slow like that. It's like the hiker that goes out, and he's got a magnifying glass and he's gonna stop and look at the insects, and he's gonna look at the funny little mushrooms, and he's gonna look at plants and flowers, and then maybe stop with a camera and take a picture of a sunset, and that sort of stuff. And sometimes that's the way you move through scripture.

Other times you need to keep the pace up, and you need to keep moving because there's a direction being set. And if you...if you slow down too much you miss that direction, you miss that sense of purpose and where the path is taking you.

And today's one of those days in scripture where we're gonna keep the pace up. We're gonna move forward through quite a few sections in the next part of Acts as we move forward, and we're gonna do it at a fairly rapid pace. In fact, I'm gonna call it my 'blue grass preaching'. Ok? We're gonna really move quick. And what I'm gonna encourage you to do is have your Bibles open, and you can kinda track with me as we go, because we're gonna be just kinda touchin' places and movin' on, and touchin' and movin' on. Because there's a sequence of events I want you to see, because it'll help you to get a sense of the purpose and the flow of what's going on in the book of Acts; even more importantly, the purpose and the flow of what God is doing, I believe, all the time. And we see it when we kinda move through these events, and we get a feel of the flow of what's happening.

We're gonna do that in Acts. We're gonna pick it up at the end of chapter 4 in the book of Acts, where we have a tremendous time of witness going on in the church at this moment in church history. Some...very shortly before this, Jesus had ascended to heaven. He'd been crucified, buried, and then He met with His disciples after His resurrection. He gave them a convincing of proofs that He was, in fact, alive; it wasn't a ghost, it wasn't a spirit. It truly was Jesus in their midst. And then He ascended to heaven. And as He left, He gave them an assignment. He left them behind to bear witness—to testify to His reality, to give the message of who He is, what He said, and what He did; most specifically, to affirm that He is alive from the dead.

That was the task He gave the church in Acts chapter 1. They did as He told them to do. They waited until the Spirit of God came upon them as was promised in Acts chapter 2. And then they began to give witness. They began to speak of the reality of Jesus. And as they did so, people began to respond. The first time they did it, three thousand people stepped forward in the streets of Jerusalem and said, 'We wanna follow Jesus.' The small little group of a hundred or so followers suddenly became a people movement in the city of Jerusalem.

And then that stirred resistance. And there came a reaction from the authorities in the temple, and they said...they pulled Peter and John aside...two of the leading apostles...and they said, 'We do not wanna hear you mention the name of Jesus again in this city.' We're told, in chapter 4, that they chose to keep speaking the name of Jesus. And the church prayed and asked God to help them, enable them to do that, and they continued to speak the name of Jesus. And that takes us to where we are here in chapter 4, verses 32-37; a tremendous time of witness as they continue to talk about Jesus.

The church itself, we're told, the congregation of believers, were all of one heart and soul. There was a unity then that was just tremendous. There was kind of a "one for all and all for one" attitude. And they were taking care of each other. They were watching out for each other. And as the church was taking care of each other, and you had this tremendous sense of oneness, we're told that the testimony kept going out—specifically through the apostles, those that had been appointed by Jesus to be the authoritative witnesses to all that He said and did. And we're told, in verse 32, that they were giving witness, they were testifying with great power. They were giving testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, that He was alive. And when it says great power, they're referring to the signs and wonders that these apostles were performing. They were performing miracles that were just astounding. And as they performed these miracles they would keep talking about how Jesus was working in them and through them, and that He is, in fact, alive.

But in addition to all the signs and wonders and the testimony, there was another thing going on that struck people, that got their attention. And that was in this group there was not a needy person among them. And it goes on to describe why that was. And it was because those that owned property and possessions would sell them, and they would bring the proceeds and they would lay them at the feet of the apostles. And the apostles would distribute those proceeds to the people as they had need. It was a tremendous time of sharing. In fact, we have an example right at the end of chapter 4, where we're told that a man by the name of Barnabas...at least that's what they nicknamed him—it meant 'son of encouragement'. And he had property, and he sold it. And then he brought the proceeds from that sale and he laid it at the feet of the apostles for distribution to the poor. Tremendous time of witness in the early church.

But then it was all threatened. It was all put at risk when we come into chapter 5, verses 1-10. The threat, the danger, was severe. It was nothing short of satanic. It was an attack of the Evil One, who is opposed to all that God stands for, all the good God is wanting to accomplish. The Evil One attacked the church. Now, he didn't do it directly. In fact, if you were sitting there watching and you were just an ordinary person, you probably would not have understood at all that this was satanic. But it was; it was a subversive act from within. And it centers around a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira. (Now, Ananias is misspelled on the Powerpoint. I'll let you know that...there should be two 'n's', ok? I couldn't buy one at that point. ☺)

This is a couple that, to all practical purposes when you looked at them, looked like they were doing exactly what everyone else was doing in the early church. And when you looked at 'em you assumed they were like...they were doin' exactly what everyone else was doin'. They had gone out, they had sold their property, and they had brought the proceeds and they had put them at the feet of the apostles and were givin' it all to Jesus. That's what it looked like. But when you read the text you discover that isn't the reality of the situation; that Ananias and his wife had decided they were gonna keep some of the proceeds for themselves. They weren't gonna give it all to the apostles. They wouldn't tell anybody. They would just give it, and it would look like they were doin' what everybody else was doin'. Everybody would think they were doin' what everybody else was doin', that they were selling it all and giving it all. But really, they would hold back some for themselves. They did this, we're told, in full agreement with one another, full knowledge. And so that's what happens. Ananias comes in first to bring the proceeds of the sale. And he brings the portion that he's decided to give. And he lays it at the feet of the apostles while he holds onto a portion for himself.

We're told that Peter knew exactly what was goin' on. This great apostle confronts him about it. And he lets Ananias know that 'the problem is not the fact that you sold your property and didn't give enough.' That wasn't the problem. In fact, God hadn't even asked him to sell the property. That wasn't somethin' he had to do, and God didn't even ask him to give a hundred percent of the proceeds. That was not something God required of him. He coulda kept the property. Once he sold it he coulda kept all the proceeds if he wanted. The thing that God was disturbed with, the thing that was a lie in all this, was to come in and act 'like you were doing what everyone else was doing, that you were giving it all.' And Peter calls him on that.

And when he calls him on that, and he says, 'You're lying to us; in fact, you're not lying to us...you're lying to God, and you're lying to the Holy Spirit here,' we're told that Ananias suddenly fell and died. And some young men that were there at the church that day came up and picked up the body, carried it out and buried it. They did things quickly.

It's about three hours later that his wife comes in. She doesn't know what's happened. She comes in, and we're told that Peter responded to her, which tells us that she'd asked a question. And most likely the question was, 'Have you seen my husband?' The question Peter replies to is, 'Did you sell your property for this amount?' It was the amount that Ananias had donated. And she replies, 'Yes, we did.' She tells the lie. Peter calls her on it. Immediately she, too, falls dead. And the young men pick her up and carry her out.

It's an extreme situation. We hesitate when we read it, and say, "Wow! Were things that severe? I mean, they're just doin' what a lot of other people do; just kinda put on a façade and go through the motions. And they were actually trying to do some good here. It was just a little lie.' But Peter, from his vantage point, not only recognized it was a lie; he recognized the source of the lie. 'Cause as he speaks to Ananias in verse 3, he says, "*Why has Satan filled your heart...*" 'How is it the Evil One has led you to do this?'

Now, he'll go on and he doesn't absolve Ananias and Sapphira from their personal responsibility. He says, 'You conceived this in your heart' in verse 4. Down in verse 9 he'll talk about how they agreed together to test the Spirit. And so he doesn't say, 'Hey, you were innocent bystanders in this.' But the issue is the one who prompted it, the one who was at the point for this, was the Evil One...Satan himself.

And so Peter comes down hard, very hard. And there are some who argue that it was too hard. Others will argue that, 'You know what's happening here, is this just a moment where God's just trying to demonstrate this is really serious, and so it's kinda right at the very start God does this to say, "Ok, you've gotta be really honest here."'"

I'm convinced that the really issue, why he came down so hard, is we were dealin' with Satan, himself, tryin' to undermine the Christian witness at the very beginning, as it was just starting. He wanted to raise the question in everybody's mind—"Are these Christians really, really living what they say?"

The result of the two deaths, so immediate, in verse 11, put great fear...came over the whole church. I would think so. Not only through the whole church, but all those who heard of it and the story as it went out. I mean, can you imagine what it was like in lunch after church that day? Ok? And people heard this story, and it put great fear in everybody. But the interesting thing is, is that did not stop the witness. The witness kept going. And we're told that multitudes of men and women were constantly being added. They still kept talking about Jesus, and people kept responding to Him.

Now, we're told that some of 'em were...they were pretty cautious. In other words, they would respect the Christians, but they would stay kind of a safe distance away...'Don't get around those apostles—people die around them.' Ok? And at the same time, they were drawn to them because people were healed by them. You go through this section in verses 11-14 and you have this tremendous picture of people just being touched by the power of God's Spirit through the apostles. Probably one of the most dramatic pictures of it is Peter walking in the streets of Jerusalem, and people would bring their sick and their loved ones, and they would put them by the sidewalk or by the street in the hopes that, as Peter walked by, the shadow cast by the sun as it hit upon him...the shadow of Peter would land on these sick and they would be healed. That was happening.

They began to go beyond Jerusalem. They went to all the cities nearby, and the towns nearby. And they began to bring the sick, and the distraught; and they'd bring them in, and the apostles would meet with them, and they would heal them. And it says all who came were healed. It was a tremendous time of witness.

But then it was threatened once again. Only this time, instead of a satanic attack, we just have plain, simple, human resistance. We're told, when we come to verse 17, that the high priest rose up along with all his associates. He says, 'We gotta stop this. We've warned 'em before to not speak about Jesus. They're continuing to do it. Things are getting out of control. We gotta stop this.' And so they arrest not just Peter and John this time; they arrest all twelve apostles. And they put them in the public jail. In other words, they made a public scene out of putting them in jail.

Interesting thing happened that night, however. We're told that when the public wasn't watching, the angel of the Lord came in and released those twelve apostles. Now, he didn't tell 'em, 'Get out of here and be safe.' He said, 'Go right back into the temple and keep talking.' And that's what they did.

The poor council of leaders, of religious leaders, meet under the instigation of the high priest. They say to the guards, 'Bring in those prisoners,' and the guards come back and say, 'We can't find 'em.' And then report comes that, 'Hey, those people you're lookin' for? They're down in the temple talkin' about Jesus again.'

So they have 'em arrested and brought in. And as they bring 'em in they put a challenge to 'em. They say to them, 'We told you not to speak of that name any more. We told you don't do this.' We're told that Peter's response to their challenge is very similar to what he said before. In verse 29 here, he says, "*We must obey God rather than men.*" 'We've had an angel of God tell us to do this. We're not gonna listen to you guys. You need to understand,' Peter goes on to say, 'that this Jesus who you crucified, who you put to death...God's raised Him from the dead. God's raised Him from the dead. He's alive!' And he goes on to say, 'We are witnesses to this. We are here to speak of that. That's our calling, that's our purpose, that's our command. And not only is it us bearing witness; it's the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him, to all those who respond to the call of faith in obedience. The Holy Spirit is coming upon 'em, and He's witnessing to the reality of Jesus.'

This really gets to the Sanhedrin; and we're told they were cut to the quick; they were pierced to the heart. They were very upset...so upset it says they intended to kill them.

At this point a man with a more level head steps forward. He's a Pharisee, well-respected, a renowned teacher of that day—a Pharisee named Gamaliel...(I never do get that pronunciation right—just call him 'Gam', alright?) He was well-respected. He comes in...he has a different...he calms everybody down in the Sanhedrin. He's part of the conservative element, and he calms everybody down. He says, 'Listen, we've been through this kind of thing before.' And he goes on and he cites two different examples, near the end of chapter 5, of men who started messianic movements, people gathered around them, and then the leader was put to death and the groups disbanded. He says, 'That's probably what's gonna happen here.' He says, 'Don't panic, guys. Just leave it be and it will disappear. We've seen this sort of thing before. Except,' he says, 'here'd be the one problem—if it's from God. Then you're not going to be able to overthrow them. You're not going to be able to stop them if this is really from God. In fact,' he says, 'if you do try to stop them you're going to find yourself fighting God on this.'

So we're told they took his advice, this level-headed advice, and they brought the apostles back in...all twelve of them. And they said, 'Don't use the name of Jesus again.' And they flogged them, and they let them go.

But that didn't stop the witness; didn't stop the witness at all. After that human resistance we're told that they rejoiced at the fact that they had been able to suffer for the cause of Jesus. And we're told in verse 42 that

*Every day, in the temple and from home to home, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*

Nothing slowed down for the witness. But then it was threatened again. It says at this time, while this new, fresh witness was going forward, while the disciples were increasing in number—and the best guess right now puts it at about 20,000 believers, maybe, in Jerusalem at this time—starting from that small group of about 120, they now have over 20,000 have responded to Jesus. I mean, things are getting difficult. And in that, a complaint arises.

It's a legitimate complaint...a legitimate complaint. One group of widows who were of Greek culture and lifestyle...some Hebrews had adopted Greek ways. And then there was other groups of widows that had stuck with the older, conservative Hebrew ways. And anyway, within the church you had both of these groups. And it was felt like those who came from the Hellenistic, or the Greek, backgrounds—even though they were Jewish and now they'd become Christian, they'd bought into Greek ways—they were feeling...they felt like those were not being treated fairly in the distribution of the daily food. See, as the apostles would receive the proceeds of the sale of different properties and possessions, they would take that funding and they would buy food, and they would distribute it to the needy, and at the very front of the needy in that culture at that time were the widows. And so they were providing for these widows, and it felt like one group wasn't getting as fair treatment as another group. And so a complaint arose.

It was probably a legitimate complaint. When you're trying to administer things for 20,000 people and there's only twelve of you...it gets messed up. Things probably weren't fair. And the threat to the church at that point, with the disciples, with the apostles, is that they would be distracted from the harried press to take care of these needs. They see that. They're aware of that. They're cautious about it. And so they come up with a solution. And what the disciples, the apostles, say—they say, 'It's not desirable for us, it's not good for us, it shouldn't be this way that we neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.' Now, it isn't denigrating the ministry of distributing food. It's just simply saying, 'If we start doing that, we can't do what we're called to do. This isn't gonna work.'

And so what they say to the congregation is, 'Select from you, among you, seven men full of wisdom, full of the Spirit, and let them help us. Let them take care of that while we continue to devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. It's a commonsense solution. Let's get some help here.' And that's exactly what they do. They choose seven people. They step forward. They begin to take care of that administrative task, making sure that the food is distributed equitably and fairly; and the apostles are able to go on, and they're able to continue to devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. They're able to keep the witness of Jesus going. And we're told that the witness did keep going.

Powerful statement here—it says

*The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of disciples continued to increase in Jerusalem,*

...and then I love this one...

*...and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.*

Even the priests were beginning to respond and believe in Jesus!

You stand back, and you see that, and you recognize the pattern of what's going on. We have the witness continues, and it continues threat after threat. I mean, we've got the satanic subversion—probably the most challenging of the three threats to the witness, the one that you couldn't see coming, the one the Apostle Paul was given insight to recognize 'Hey, this is what's happening.' That didn't stop the witness of the church.

The human resistance, the, you know, 'Stop talking about Jesus or you're gonna die,' type of threat—that doesn't stop the witness.

And third and finally, that press to take care of everything you have to take care of—that doesn't stop the witness to Jesus.

We look at that, and it's impressive. The danger here is we think it's because of those men and those women of that day; that they were somehow more heroic, more diligent, more focused. "I mean, that's when Christians were real Christians! That's when men were real men, and women were real women, and they could keep pressing forward for the witness!" Listen, it wasn't because they were great, heroic people. And this you need to understand—the 'why' behind the witness proceeding to go through threat after threat after threat, and not stopping, is very simply a fulfillment of what Jesus said would happen, in Acts chapter 1 verse 8. He says "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.*" What we're seeing here is a working of God's Spirit moving in and through a group of people. And Jesus said, 'When that Spirit comes upon you, and you have that power of the Spirit working in you and through you, you shall be My witnesses.' It's not 'you might be,' 'you could be,' 'if you hang on you possibly might;' He says 'You *shall* be My witnesses when the Spirit comes upon you.'

And that's exactly what happened. The Spirit filled these people like a wind filling the sail of a boat. And it carried them through, no matter what the threat was. And they kept giving witness to Jesus.

And I'm convinced that's the way it always is. When the Spirit fills the Church, it will give witness to the reality of Jesus. When the Spirit of God is moving in and through a group of people, ordinary Christians like you and I, when the Spirit of God is moving in and through us we will tell His story. We will speak His name. We will, in all our varied life circumstances and conditions, speak the name of Jesus. When the Spirit of God moves in and through ordinary people like you and I, we will tell His story and we will speak His name.

I know as soon as I say that...there is a...there's a disappointment that comes. In fact, there's even a disinterest that settles in. In some cases it even becomes resistance. You see, when we talk about the Spirit the thing we get interested in, the thing we get excited about, is experience; that with the Spirit we will be able to sense the reality of the spiritual. "We'll have mystery; we'll have miracles. If nothing else, maybe we'll at least have solutions to some of the unsolvable problems we're wrestling with. And if that's what you mean when you talk about the Spirit filling us, then I want in; I'm interested. But if it's about witnessing, ah, I'm not really that concerned."

Or maybe it's about transformation, the Spirit of God touching our spirit deep within the very core of our being; and the fruit of that, result of that being that we become a person of love and joy and peace, of gentleness, kindness and goodness, of self-control and patience and faithfulness. All those things the Bible says are the fruit of the Spirit. And our response is, "If that's what the filling of the Spirit is about, if that's what will happen, then I want that. I'm interested. Let's talk about that."

But if it's about witnessing? "If it's about telling His story and speaking His name in all our life circumstances and conditions, I'm not that worried about that."

Or maybe it's connection—the reality of us all sharing one spirit to such a level and such degree that our hearts, our lives, are woven together; that it's all-for-one and one-for-all; and there is not a needy one among us because of the Spirit moving in and through and among us. You say, "You know, if that's what you're talking about when you talk about being filled with the Spirit, I'm interested. I'm sitting on the front edge of my seat—talk about it!"

"But if it's about witnessing, I'm not interested."

It is about witnessing. In fact, everything I just mentioned is what I call 'witness-driven.' There must be a witness to the reality, the glory, and the mystery of Jesus, or there will not be any experience, any transformation, and any connection. The story of Jesus must be told, and His name must be named.

I'll give you an athletic analogy. Basketball team...some people, what they really want in their athletic experience in bein' on a basketball team is that they experience 'team'—relationships are to last, friends that are with you. And the most important thing to them is a team that really bonds. And then there are those that say, 'You know what? It's not so much, for us, about bein' a team. For us, it's about character. We wanna...we want to be the team that gets the good sportsmanship award. We really don't care about winning...we just wanna be very good when we lose. And then there's those that say, 'You know what? Really what I want in this experience is I want my stats to look great, and in fact, I wanna be nominated, and I want to win an all-American award, and I really am not that concerned whether this team ever hits the national championship. I get my award.' And then there's those in the classic...who say, 'You know what? We just wanna have fun. We just wanna have fun. Winning's not that important.'

With our God and what He's dealing with, winning is all-important. Winning is all-important. And I'm not talking about basketballs and tournaments here. God is determined that evil will not have the last word in this world. The last world will be the glory, the mystery, and the wonder of Jesus. And our God is determined that evil will not have the last word on any soul. The last word will be the wonder, and the glory, and the mystery of Jesus. Our God is determined, determined, that the story of Jesus be told and His name be named. And if we don't share that passion with Him, if we don't engage that heart with Him, then all our connection, all our stabs at transformation, and all desperation to experience the spiritual will have a hollow ring to it, because it will not be authentic.

His story must be told, and His name must be spoken.

Let's stand.

We're gonna go on to the weeks ahead, and we're gonna build one more sermon on this series before we get to November 2<sup>nd</sup>, and we talk about "What do we do in response to what we're seein' in Acts." We'll talk about that on November 2<sup>nd</sup>. But right now, let's go out with the Lord's blessing upon us.

[Congregation sings blessing song and is dismissed.]