



# CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

## SERIES I

### THE GOSPEL OF LUKE AND ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Lesson 21 Commentary Acts 3 - 5

Lesson 22 Questions Acts 6 - 9

### THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM GROWS Acts 3-5

#### I. INTRODUCTION

We continue the story of Luke as the Apostles begin their ministry, equipped with their years with Jesus and their new infilling with the Holy Spirit. As we read in last week's chapter 2, "Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area" (Acts 2:46). It is on their way to afternoon prayer there that Peter and John began the amazing wonder-working that accompanies the church ever since and is a sign of God's presence there.

Not only miracles begin now, and other Jerusalem people join the company of the apostles and the first Christians of Pentecost Day, but from now on, the apostles get first acquaintance with the public jail. "Filled with jealousy" (Acts 5:18), the Sanhedrin began the first persecution of the Church, the first of many that men, in ignorance, fear, or unwillingness to hear truths which disturb their lifestyles, will wage against God and His Church.

But mere men can not outdo God. His own action against these religious men who rejected His own Messiah sent to them is swift and sure;

the apostles and the Christian community go right on, and with the help of a member of the Sanhedrin!

#### II. PETER AND JOHN ATTRACT A CROWD (Acts 3:1-26)

**A. A Miracle.** As in the Gospels, Peter and John are often together. One afternoon soon after the Holy Spirit filled the gathered Christians, the two of them were going to the temple for the hour of prayer. A poor beggar that always sat at the temple gate, a man crippled from birth begged from them. As Peter heard the begging he was struck with an understanding of what he did have to give. His answer is one of the memorable texts in the New Testament. "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, walk!" What Peter had was authority and the power-full name of Jesus. As he said the words to the beggar he grasped him by the arm and helped him up. "Instantly his feet and ankles became firm." We can just see the three of them as they headed for the Temple, the man jumping around and crying out praises to God.

**B. Peter Teaches a Crowd (Acts 3:11-26).** As the people recognized who the man was, jumping and crying out with joy and clinging to Peter and John, they ran to them. Here, we see the effects of the Holy Spirit, Peter was not a speaker, he was an ordinary fisherman, probably one who would have absolutely avoided giving a public talk. But now he calls out:

“Men of Israel! Why are you so surprised, staring at us as though we had made this man walk?”

Then shrewdly he names their ancestral God, the one God that set them apart from so many false gods, “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... who has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over..., it was you who put to death...”

In this way, Peter shows the continuity of the Church with the Old Testament representatives and servants of God, and taught his listeners the resurrection of Jesus, a descendant of David, of Abraham. as the speech goes on, Peter refers to the prophets, to Moses, and finally, he reminds them that “You are the heirs of the prophets, the heirs of the covenant ... It was for you .... that God raised up his servant.”

“This is Jesus, whom heaven must keep till the universal restoration comes” (Acts 3:21).

This masterful speech in the temple precincts is an example of the change that had occurred in this former fisherman who had run away from danger when his Leader was being arrested—a change that came from the power of the Holy Spirit, the third Person in God. Fear has simply gone.

There had been nine days of prayer by the apostles and the Community to prepare for the coming of the Holy Spirit in such power and fullness. We too need to ask for such a change in us from the Holy Spirit; need to pray to the Holy

Spirit for the Church today, for our own response to the times.

**C. The Speeches in Acts.** Luke, the Greek convert to Christ is thought to have himself written the speeches that occur in Acts, for it is very unlikely that there were any copies or exact sources of them. But all these speeches, as this one, certainly had sources which Luke could have heard from prior traditions. It is made clear in his introductions that he did research before he wrote his Gospel and Acts: “As these were handed down to us by those who from the outset were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word. I .... after carefully going over the whole story... have decided to write an orderly account for you” (Luke 1:2-3).

### III. DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CHURCH (Acts 4:1 - 5:11)

**A. Peter and John before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1-22).** The running of the crowd to Peter and his response with an obvious teaching, alerted the temple guards, priests, and Sadducees. Remember that these latter did not accept a resurrection of the dead, which Peter had just proclaimed. So they arrested the two apostles for the night, Luke adds the result of the second speech of Peter. “Many of those who had listened became believers; the total number of men had now risen to something like five thousand” (Acts 4:4).

The next day the whole Sanhedrin assembled, including all four of the living former high priests (the Romans demoted one they did not like; the office was, according to Jewish law, inherited for a lifetime, so they simply called them all) (Acts 4:5-7).

Standing before this angry assembly, Peter and John were asked. “By what power and by whose name have you men done this?” At that, the Power of the Holy Spirit “filled” Peter. His short answer was very clear and confident and

included a quote from Psalm 118:22. Astonished at the fearlessness of these “uneducated ordinary men” and confounded by the presence of the man who had been cured, the Sanhedrin had a private conversation and then, after warning them against teaching in the name of Jesus, they released them (Acts 4:8-22).

**B. The Return of Peter and John to the Community (Acts 4:23-31).** There is a wonderful incentive for us as we gather for the Eucharist as a Christian Community, or at any occasion, as we read of their response to the story Peter and John told: “They lifted up their voice to God with one heart.” In our weakness and lack of such a powerful occasion, we can seldom worship and pray together with such unity and enthusiasm, but we can put this ideal before us as we go to Mass, or on other group prayer occasions: “lift up our voice to God with one heart”—with a whole heart.

Another way we can learn from and imitate this first group of Christians is to ask as they did for strength “to proclaim your message with all fearlessness” and that God “stretch out your hand to heal and to work miracles and marvels through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” Do we in our personal or church lives ask for this? I fear that sometimes we look askance at Christians who do. Despite our division into churches God is answering such prayers and there are such miracles in Christian churches today, perhaps because we so need signs of God in our society with many atheists (Acts 4:29-30).

At this prayer of the community, again the sign of the Holy Spirit’s power and presence came. “The house where they were assembled rocked, and from this time they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim the word of God fearlessly” (Acts 4:31).

**C. The Church in Acts and the New Testament**

**1. The Visible Church.** This included all the believers anywhere, and also meant a local church, such as at Jerusalem or Antioch (Acts 4:32, 13:1). Our Catholic doctrine calls this the “militant church”—one still fighting against sin, error, and persecution.

## 2. The Invisible Church

**a. Those Being Prepared for Heaven.** Those who have lived their faith and died in it with some degrees of infidelities, faults, and many sins that were not “mortal”—deadly, as St. John writes in his epistle; those who were attached to some sin, though not mortal, preferring it than to give it up. All these are not fit yet to come into the presence of God; they need repentance and cleansing. This is where the word “purgatory” came from—it is a state of cleansing. There is misunderstanding on this.

St. John of the Cross, the great Doctor of the Church on the spiritual life and development of a Christian, describes this state when gone through on earth by a saint. He notes that this is gone through later by many imperfect souls after death. “Before.... the divine can be united to the substance of the soul through a person’s perfect and complete purgation and purity, the Holy Spirit’s fire wounds it by destroying and consuming the imperfections of its bad habits, disposing it for the divine union and transformation in God... Spiritual writers call this the purgative way. In it a person suffers great deprivation and feels heavy afflictions in his spirit... The light and beat of the divine fire causes it to see and feel those weaknesses and miseries which resided within it, hidden and unfelt .... A person’s sufferings at this time cannot be exaggerated; they are but little less than the sufferings of purgatory” (The Living Flame of Love, Collected Works, p. 587).

**b. The Triumphant Church. (Ephesians 1:5-6, 1 Peter 1:3-7).** When souls are perfect, they rush to God in heaven. “After

this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands” (Revelation 7:9, 16-17). Several other texts tell us the role of the church as in the texts listed above.

Let us return to the visible church of Peter and John.

**D. The Early Christian Community in Jerusalem (Acts 4:32-35).** These believers were so united in heart and soul that they gave, all to the community and all was held in common. The wonderful result was that “None ... was ever in want.” What if that prevailed in American Christians today? Only recently, at a meeting of the Focolare members in Dallas and Fort Worth, a movement among them in several places to do this very thing, was described, especially in Brazil, when a small settlement was made as a new “city” based on economic ownership together, plus all the usual love for each other that the Focolarini are known for worldwide. I went to this meeting and would like to see CSS members become Focolare members.

#### **IV. THREE EARLY CHRISTIAN EXAMPLES (Acts 4:36 - 5:11)**

**A. Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37).** Joseph, a Hebrew and a descendant of Levi, Jacob’s son, was from the island of Cyprus, but was an immigrant to Jerusalem. He owned a piece of land there. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he was inspired to sell his land and “present the money to the apostles.” He wanted to give all to Christ for His church and for His poor. This is an early, example, of the Spirit calling, through the Church’s history, thousands, millions even, to what we call “religious life.” These vow poverty, and dispose of their property for the sake of God and His people. You must have met a number of these.

Barnabas, whom the apostles named this because he was “the son of support and defend,” later became Paul’s friend and helper. He was the one who introduced Paul to Peter; then later went on Paul’s journeys with him.

**B. Fraud of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).** This couple decided to sell some property and give the proceeds to Peter for the Church. Secretly Ananias kept back some of it for himself and Sapphira, perhaps even pretended that it was the total amount; in other words, lied about it to Peter and the community. At this time, the Jerusalem community was quite poor, there was a famine, and many were reduced to hunger, especially widows. God gave inner knowledge of this lie to Peter; it was a lie to the Holy Spirit and to the community. Peter sternly told Ananias that he did not need to give it all, that he could have volunteered to share it, but for him and Sapphira to agree to lie to the church and to God and His representative, was a serious sin. Ananias fell dead at Peter’s feet, as did Sapphira later. The story shocks us, as it did the Jerusalem community “and great fear came upon the whole church.” It may have been necessary as an example to those then who were not entirely sincere, as we sometimes are not, in our good deeds. Later you will see how Paul handled their needs and taught his Christian converts how to take care of the Christian poor.

#### **V. GOD’S POWER AND THE SANHEDRIN (Acts 5:12-42)**

The amazing deeds of the Apostles, their miracles, and the growth in numbers of believers, especially when even Peter’s shadow brought hope of cure for sick laid in the streets as he passed by. Crowds came from the towns. The high priests and the Sadducees could not stand it any longer. Again, they arrested the Apostles, all of them.

That night an angel awoke them and led them out to “tell all the people all about this new life.”

At dawn, they began their preaching. When it was reported to the Sanhedrin who had sent for them, there was great embarrassment and anger. Again they were brought in and sternly accused. Peter's reply creates in us a wish that we could say the same thing; "Obedience to God comes before obedience to men" (Acts 5:29). Do we act by this truth, even if it hurts.?

The Sanhedrin ardently wished "they could put them to death," but their fear of the people was too great. At that point, the rabbi who had taught Paul as a young disciple in Jerusalem, Gamaliel, stood up and advised caution, for "if this movement does in fact come from God you will... find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5:39). His advice was accepted. There is a statue of Gamaliel in an old monastery in France, with a legend there that Gamaliel became a Christian.

The irate, supposedly Godly men, ordered the apostles whipped, warned them not to speak of Jesus, and released them. The reaction of the Apostles to all of this, again, gives us a powerful witness to what the Holy Spirit can be to once

frightened and cowardly people, much as we are perhaps at times. Luke remarks: "And so they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, glad to have had the honor of suffering humiliation for the sake of the Name" (Acts 5:41). They went back to telling "the good news" of Jesus, in the temple, and here is a new addition: "and in private houses."

We cannot fight God and win, as so many have tried who are now long gone, and the Church, led by the Holy Spirit, the mighty third Person, still triumphs over all opposition in the end. So Russian Communism has disappeared, as the Mother of Jesus, the Man-God, prophesied, "through prayer and fasting." So we should take heart and set to work in our own lives' trials and disasters. If our heart is with God, He is with us, even in our trials. Ultimately, all the Apostles were martyrs, but their commission to begin the church surmounted every obstacle. Their life did not end with their martyrdom, but was freed for eternal life. Trials cannot destroy us, as bad as they may seem. "Rejoice, and exult, for your reward will be great in heaven" Jesus once said to the Apostles (Luke 6:23).

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## QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 22

Acts 6 - 9

Day 1 Read the Notes. As you read, underline a few lines that helped or informed you. Share one.

Day 2

a. Read Acts 6:1-7. Notice the process the twelve followed in taking care of a problem in the Church. What do you learn or admire in the story?

b. Read Acts 6:8-15, Matthew 26:57, 59-61.

1. What made Stephen stand out among the new deacons?

2. What do we learn about the weakness at times of even religious people?

Day 3 Acts 7:1-53

a. Read as much as you can of Stephen's speech, finding as you go, a quotation or a fact that spoke to you, to share. At least read verses 1-4, 8-11, 14-36, 39-42.

b. Read Acts 7: 51-60, 2 Chronicles 36:15-17. What does this teach you?

c. Find in Acts 7:51 and 55 two reactions to the Holy Spirit. Can this happen among Christians today? How can we avoid the attitude that these religious Jews had?

Day 4 Read Acts 8:1-8.

a. In what ways was the persecution good?

