

# The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

## Lesson 9: Persecution and Bold Witness

### Acts 5:12-42

#### Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 5:12-42 shows the church pressed by jealous opposition and responding with unshakeable courage and joy. What is doctrinally at stake includes the supremacy of God's authority over human commands (we must obey God rather than men, v. 29), the exaltation of Jesus as Leader and Savior who grants repentance and forgiveness (vv. 30-31), the unstoppable purposes of God (vv. 38-39), and the New Testament theology of rejoicing in suffering for Christ's name (v. 41).

The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on suffering for Christ as an occasion for joy and on the unstoppable advance of God's work. Teach that persecution is a normal part of faithful discipleship, that God sovereignly advances His gospel through it, and that to share Christ's reproach is a privilege. Connect this to the wider New Testament witness on suffering.

Yet aim at the heart. These verses are meant to make timid believers bold and anxious believers steady. Help students grow in courageous obedience, in trust that God's purposes cannot be defeated, in glad submission to Jesus as both Leader and Savior, and in the strange, sturdy joy of those willing to suffer for the name they love.

#### Question 1

##### Student Question:

*An angel released the apostles from prison and commanded them to go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life (vv. 19-20). What does God's deliverance and command reveal about His purposes for His persecuted people, and why does Luke call the gospel the words of this Life?*

#### Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice what God's deliverance was for. The angel did not free the apostles so they could flee to safety; he sent them straight back into the temple, the very place of danger, to keep preaching. God's purpose in delivering them was not their comfort but the continued proclamation of the gospel.

This reframes how we think about God's help. He often rescues us not to remove us from the mission but to return us to it. The apostles were spared so the words of life could keep going out. God's care for His people is always bound up with His purposes for the world.

The phrase the words of this Life is beautiful and significant. The gospel is not merely information or religion; it is life. To know Christ is to have life, and to proclaim Him is to offer life to the dead. Jesus said His words are spirit and life (John 6:63), and that knowing God and Christ is eternal life (John 17:3).

Help students see the dignity and urgency of the message we carry. We do not peddle opinions; we announce life to a dying world. And like the apostles, we may find that God delivers us from trouble not to retire us but to send us back to the work He has given.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- God's deliverance serving His mission, not merely our comfort
- The gospel as the words of life (John 6:63; 17:3)
- God's care for His people bound up with His purposes for the world
- The dignity and urgency of proclaiming Christ

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Why did the angel send the apostles back into danger rather than to safety?
- What does it mean that the gospel is the words of this Life?
- How might God deliver us not from the mission but back into it?

## **Question 2**

### **Student Question:**

*The apostles obeyed God's command to keep preaching even though it meant walking straight back into danger (vv. 20-21). When obeying God is risky or costly, do you tend to obey promptly or look for a safer path? Where is God calling you to costly obedience right now?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

The apostles' obedience is striking for its immediacy and its courage. At daybreak they were in the temple teaching, exactly where they had been arrested. There was no hesitation, no negotiation, no waiting for safer conditions. God said go, and they went.

Most of us prefer obedience that is convenient and low-risk. When following God threatens our comfort, reputation, relationships, or security, we are tempted to delay, soften, or look for a safer alternative that lets us feel obedient without paying the cost.

Invite students to name where God may be calling them to costly obedience, a hard conversation, a stand for truth, a sacrifice of time or money, a forgiveness that feels risky, a witness that could cost them socially. Real obedience often costs something.

Encourage them with the apostles' example and with the truth that God is worthy of obedience even when it is costly, and faithful to those who obey Him. Courage grows not by waiting until obedience feels safe but by stepping out in trust, as the apostles did.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Prompt obedience even when it is costly
- The temptation to seek a safer, more convenient path
- God's worthiness of obedience regardless of cost
- Courage cultivated by stepping out in trust

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Do you tend to obey God promptly or look for a safer path?
- What is one costly act of obedience God may be calling you to?
- What holds you back, and how might trust in God overcome it?

### **Question 3**

#### **Student Question:**

*When commanded again to stop preaching, Peter and the apostles answered, we must obey God rather than men (v. 29). Why is this principle the settled conviction of the faithful, and how does it shape the believer's relationship to every other authority?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Peter states the principle as a settled conviction, not a momentary defiance: we must obey God rather than men. When any human authority, religious or civil, commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands, the believer's course is clear. God's authority is supreme over every other.

This conviction flows from who God is. He is the Creator, Lord, and Judge of all; every human authority is derivative and accountable to Him. To obey a human command over a divine one would be to treat the creature as higher than the Creator. The faithful cannot do this.

At the same time, as we saw earlier, this principle does not breed general rebellion. Scripture calls us to honor and submit to authorities as a matter of obedience to God (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17). The believer is ordinarily the most conscientious of citizens, workers, and family members. The line is drawn only where human authority would require disobedience to God.

Help students hold this conviction with both firmness and grace. We submit gladly to authority in its proper sphere, but our ultimate allegiance belongs to God alone. No threat, pressure, or penalty can rightly move us to disobey Him. This settled conviction is the backbone of faithful living in a fallen world.

## **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The supremacy of God's authority over every human authority (v. 29)
- Human authority as derivative and accountable to God
- Ordinary submission to authority as obedience to God (Romans 13; 1 Peter 2)
- The line drawn only where obedience to God is at stake
- Ultimate allegiance belonging to God alone

## **Discussion Prompts**

- Why is obeying God over men a settled conviction rather than mere defiance?
- How does this principle still call us to honor legitimate authority?
- Where might this conviction be tested in your own life?

## **Question 4**

### **Student Question:**

*Peter refused to let the threats of powerful men move him to disobey God (vv. 27-29). Where do you feel pressure, from culture, work, friends, or family, to compromise what God has clearly commanded? How can you stand firm with both courage and grace?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

The pressure Peter faced was intense and official, but the pressures we face are real too, even when they are subtler. The culture, the workplace, peer groups, and sometimes even family can press us to soften, hide, or set aside what God has clearly said.

Invite students to name the specific pressures they feel, to stay silent about their faith, to go along with what they know is wrong, to affirm what God calls sin, to compromise their integrity for advancement or acceptance. Naming the pressure helps us prepare to meet it.

Standing firm requires both courage and grace. Like the apostles, we hold our ground on God's commands, but we do so respectfully, without arrogance or hostility. We are not called to be combative but to be faithful, speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and accepting whatever cost comes.

Encourage students that they do not stand alone or in their own strength. The same God who emboldened the apostles strengthens us, and a community of believers can help us stand. Prepare your convictions before the pressure comes, so that when it does, your answer, like Peter's, is already settled.

## **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The pressure to compromise God's clear commands
- Standing firm with both courage and grace

- Speaking truth in love rather than hostility (Ephesians 4:15)
- Settled convictions prepared before testing comes

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Where do you feel pressure to compromise what God has commanded?
- How can you stand firm without becoming combative?
- What conviction do you need to settle now, before the pressure comes?

### **Question 5**

#### **Student Question:**

*Peter preached that God exalted Jesus at His right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance and forgiveness of sins (vv. 30-31). What does it mean that Jesus is both Leader and Savior, and why is it significant that repentance and forgiveness come through Him?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Peter gives Jesus two titles that belong together: Leader (or Prince) and Savior. As Savior, Jesus rescues us from sin and its penalty. As Leader, He is the ruler and pioneer we are to follow and obey. We cannot rightly take Him as one without the other; the Savior who forgives is the Leader who must be followed.

This guards against a common distortion that wants Jesus as Savior, to forgive sins, without Jesus as Lord and Leader, to govern life. But the New Testament knows no such division. The same exalted Christ who saves also reigns and leads, and saving faith submits to Him as both.

Notice too what the exalted Christ gives: repentance and forgiveness of sins. Repentance is described as His gift, granted through the gospel; God in His kindness leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). And forgiveness flows from His sacrifice and His exaltation. Both the turning and the pardon come through Christ.

Help students see the fullness of what Jesus offers and requires. He is not merely a ticket out of judgment but the Leader of a new life. To come to Him is to receive forgiveness and to fall in behind Him as our Lord, following where He leads.

#### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Jesus exalted as both Leader (Prince) and Savior (vv. 30-31)
- The inseparability of Christ as Savior and Lord
- Repentance as a gift granted through Christ and the gospel (Romans 2:4)
- Forgiveness of sins flowing from Christ's sacrifice and exaltation
- Saving faith submitting to Christ as Leader

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What does each title, Leader and Savior, tell us about Jesus?
- Why can we not rightly take Christ as Savior without taking Him as Leader?
- What does it mean that repentance and forgiveness come through Him?

## Question 6

### Student Question:

*Peter presented Jesus as both Leader and Savior, not one without the other (v. 31). Are there ways you want Jesus as your Savior, to forgive and bless you, while resisting Him as your Leader, who directs and commands you? Where does He want to lead you that you have been reluctant to follow?*

### Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question exposes a tension many believers carry. We gladly receive Jesus as Savior, the one who forgives and blesses, while quietly resisting Him as Leader, the one who tells us where to go and what to do. But Christ does not divide Himself; He is both.

Invite honest reflection. Where do I want Christ's benefits without His direction? Are there areas where I treat Him as a rescuer to call on in crisis but not a Leader to follow daily? Often we resist His leadership precisely where it would cost us most.

Help students identify where Jesus is leading and they are reluctant to follow, perhaps toward a forgiveness they do not want to extend, a sin they do not want to leave, a generosity they do not want to practice, a step of obedience they keep avoiding.

Encourage them that following Christ as Leader is not bondage but life. He leads us in paths of righteousness for our good (Psalm 23:3). The same hands that were nailed to the cross to save us are wise and loving hands to lead us. To follow Him fully is to find the life we were made for.

### Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Receiving Christ as Savior while resisting Him as Leader
- The wholeness of submission to Christ as Lord
- Following Christ's leadership as the path of life (Psalm 23:3)
- Reluctance to follow exposed in the costly areas

### Discussion Prompts

- Where do you want Christ's blessings without His direction?
- Where is Jesus leading you that you have been reluctant to follow?
- What would it look like to follow Him fully there?

## Question 7

**Student Question:**

*Gamaliel warned the council that if this movement were of men it would fail, but if it were of God, they would not be able to overthrow it, and might even be found opposing God (vv. 33-39). What does this teach about the unstoppable purposes of God, and how should that shape our confidence in the gospel?*

**Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Gamaliel, a respected teacher, offered the council a piece of wisdom that proved truer than he knew: if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God.

History has vindicated his caution. The movement the council tried to crush has outlasted the Sanhedrin, the temple, and the Roman Empire itself. The gospel could not be stopped because it was of God, and God's purposes cannot be overthrown by human opposition. As Jesus said, He would build His church, and the gates of Hades would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

This is a deep source of confidence for God's people. We do not serve a cause that hangs by a thread, dependent on our cleverness or strength. We serve the living God whose plans will stand. Opposition may rage, but it cannot finally defeat what God is doing.

Help students rest in this. The kingdom of Christ does not rise and fall with the headlines or the hostility of any age. The same God who advanced His gospel through persecuted apostles is advancing it still. Our task is faithfulness; the outcome is secure in His hands.

**Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The unstoppable purposes of God (vv. 38-39)
- Christ building His church against all opposition (Matthew 16:18)
- The futility of fighting against God
- Confidence in the gospel grounded in God's sovereignty, not our strength

**Discussion Prompts**

- How has history vindicated Gamaliel's warning?
- What does it mean that we cannot overthrow what is of God?
- How should the unstoppable nature of God's purposes shape your confidence?

**Question 8****Student Question:**

*Gamaliel recognized that no human power can overthrow what God is doing (vv. 38-39). When God's work, or your own faithfulness, seems threatened, ineffective, or slow, how do you*

*respond? What would it look like to trust God's purposes rather than be ruled by anxiety about outcomes?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

It is one thing to affirm that God's purposes are unstoppable and another to live in that confidence when His work seems fragile. We watch the culture, the church, our own efforts, and we grow anxious, as though everything depended on us and could collapse at any moment.

Invite students to notice where anxiety about outcomes rules them, worry about the future of the church, discouragement when their witness seems fruitless, fear that evil is winning, the pressure to control results. Much of this anxiety assumes the outcome rests on our shoulders.

Gamaliel's wisdom, and Jesus' promise, free us from that burden. The work is God's, and He will accomplish His purposes. We are called to faithfulness, not to guarantee results. We plant and water; God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

Encourage students toward a settled trust. This does not mean passivity or indifference; it means laboring faithfully while resting in God's sovereignty over the outcome. When we truly believe that what is of God cannot be overthrown, we can serve with energy and without anxiety, leaving the results to Him.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Trust in God's sovereignty over outcomes
- Faithfulness as our task, results as God's domain (1 Corinthians 3:6-7)
- Freedom from anxiety through confidence in God's purposes
- Diligent labor combined with restful trust

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Where does anxiety about outcomes tend to rule you?
- How does trusting God's unstoppable purposes free you to serve?
- What would change if you labored faithfully and left the results to God?

### **Question 9**

#### **Student Question:**

*After being beaten and threatened, the apostles left rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus, and they kept right on teaching every day (vv. 40-42). What does the New Testament teach about suffering for Christ, and how can the believer come to genuinely rejoice in it?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**



This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and one of the most counter-intuitive truths in Scripture. The apostles, freshly beaten, left the council not licking their wounds in self-pity but rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. How can suffering be cause for joy? The New Testament gives several reasons that together form a robust theology of suffering for Christ.

First, suffering for Christ is a privilege, a sign that we belong to Him. The apostles counted it an honor to be dishonored for Jesus. Jesus had taught that those persecuted for righteousness are blessed and should rejoice, for their reward is great in heaven (Matthew 5:10-12). Paul wrote that it has been granted to us, as a gift, not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for His sake (Philippians 1:29).

Second, suffering for Christ unites us with Him. When we share His reproach, we share in His sufferings, and there is a deep fellowship in that. Peter later wrote, rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, and if you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you (1 Peter 4:13-14).

Third, suffering for Christ is never wasted. It refines our faith, deepens our hope, advances the gospel, and is far outweighed by the eternal glory it prepares for us (Romans 5:3-5; 2 Corinthians 4:17). The apostles could rejoice because they saw their suffering in light of eternity and in light of the worth of the One they suffered for.

This does not mean Christians seek out suffering or pretend it does not hurt. The joy is not in the pain itself but in what the pain means: that we are found faithful, counted worthy, and joined to Christ. Help students see that faithful discipleship will involve some measure of reproach for the name, and that, rather than being surprised or crushed by it (1 Peter 4:12), we can meet it with the same sturdy joy as the apostles, who went right back to preaching Jesus every day. The gospel is worth it, and Christ is worth it.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Suffering for Christ as a privilege and a mark of belonging to Him
- The blessing and reward of persecution for righteousness (Matthew 5:10-12)
- Suffering for Christ granted as a gift (Philippians 1:29)
- Fellowship with Christ in His sufferings (1 Peter 4:13-14)
- Suffering as never wasted, producing endurance and glory (Romans 5:3-5; 2 Corinthians 4:17)
- Joy rooted not in pain but in faithfulness and union with Christ
- Expecting reproach as normal to discipleship (1 Peter 4:12)

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Why could the apostles rejoice after being beaten for Christ?
- What reasons does the New Testament give for joy in suffering for Christ?

- How can a believer prepare to meet reproach for the name with joy rather than despair?

## **Question 10**

### **Student Question:**

*Looking back over this whole account of courage, suffering, and unstoppable witness, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to bolder faithfulness or steadier trust, and what is one step you will take this week.*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This capstone draws the lesson to a personal response. The apostles model courageous obedience, settled conviction, joyful endurance, and tireless witness. The chapter ends with them preaching Jesus every day, undeterred.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to obey God in a costly area, to stand firm against pressure, to follow Christ as Leader where they have resisted, to trust God's purposes amid anxiety, or to meet reproach for their faith with joy rather than retreat.

Keep the focus on the worth of Christ and His gospel. The apostles endured and rejoiced because Jesus was worth it. Transformation comes when we are gripped afresh by His worth.

Close by reminding students that the same Lord who emboldened the apostles, advanced His unstoppable gospel, and filled His suffering servants with joy is at work in them, ready to make them bold, steady, and joyful witnesses in their own day.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Personal response to the call to courageous faithfulness
- The worth of Christ as the ground of endurance and joy
- Steady trust in God's unstoppable purposes
- Tireless witness as the fruit of conviction

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What most challenged or stirred you in this account?
- What specific step toward bolder faithfulness or steadier trust will you take?
- How can this group encourage one another in it?