

# Life *in the* Early Church



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Acts 2:42–46; Acts 4:34, 35; Acts 3:1–26; Acts 4:1–18; Acts 5:1–11; Acts 5:34–39.*

**Memory Text:** “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people” (*Acts 2:46, 47, NIV*).

The early church's sense of urgency could not have been stronger. The way that Jesus had answered the question concerning the establishment of the Messianic kingdom, leaving the issue of time open (*Acts 1:6–8*), could be understood to mean that everything depended on the coming of the Spirit and the completion of the apostolic mission. So, when Pentecost came, early believers thought that everything was fulfilled: they had received the Spirit and shared the gospel with the whole world. Not that the apostles had left Jerusalem and had gone out to the world, but the world had come to them (*Acts 2:5–11*).

What happened next was the church's detachment from material goods. Sensing that the time was short, they sold all they had and devoted themselves to learning and to fellowship while continuing to witness about Jesus, but only in Jerusalem. The communal life they developed, though effective in helping the poor, soon became a problem, and God had to intervene to keep the church united. This was also the time when they began to find themselves facing opposition. Yet amid it all, their faith remained unshakeable.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 21.

## Teaching and Fellowship

After Pentecost, Luke shifts the narrative to a general description of the inner life of the church in Jerusalem. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*). The four items noted appear to be basically teaching and fellowship. According to verse 46, the teaching was carried out in the temple, while the fellowship was in private homes.

The temple court was surrounded by roofed porches that were frequently used for rabbinic instruction. That the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching shows that the gift of the Spirit did not lead them to a contemplative religion but to an intense learning process under the apostles, whose authoritative teaching was authenticated by wonders and signs (*Acts 2:43*).

Spiritual fellowship was another distinctive mark of early Christian piety. The believers were constantly together, not only in the temple but also in their homes, where they shared meals, celebrated the Lord’s Supper, and prayed (*Acts 2:42, 46*). By having such daily celebrations, the early Christians expressed their hope in Jesus’ soon return, when His fellowship with them would be restored in the Messianic kingdom (*Matt. 26:29*).

Private homes played a key role in the early church’s life. The believers still attended the temple’s daily ceremonies (*Acts 3:1*), and on Sabbaths they presumably were in the synagogues with their fellow Jews (*James 2:2*), but the distinctive elements of Christian devotion were performed in homes.

**Read** Acts 2:44, 45; 4:34, 35. What was an important aspect of early Christian fellowship?

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Believing that the end was near, they decided that their material possessions, “private property” (to use a more up-to-date term), was not that important anymore. A common use of their material resources, therefore, seemed appropriate. There was no reason to worry about tomorrow, as the Messiah Himself would provide for their needs in the Messianic kingdom (*Luke 22:29, 30*). This sharing allowed them to experience a deeper sense of unity, besides becoming an extraordinary example of Christian generosity.

**How generous are you with what you have been given from the Lord?**

## The Healing of a Lame Man

In Acts 3:1, Peter and John went to the temple for the three o'clock prayer service. This indicates the essentially Jewish character of the church's faith at this early period. That is, the apostles did not go to the temple only to instruct or make new converts but because Peter and John were still Jews and, as such, were still committed to Jewish religious traditions (*Acts 20:16, 21:17–26*), at least up to this point. There they performed an astounding miracle (*Acts 3:1–10*), which gave Peter the opportunity to preach another sermon.

**Read** Acts 3:12–26. What are some of Peter's main emphases in his sermon?

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Five main points characterized early Christian preaching: Jesus was the suffering Messiah (*Acts 3:18*); God resurrected Him (*Acts 3:15*); Jesus was exalted in heaven (*Acts 3:13*); He will come again (*Acts 3:20*); and repentance is necessary for the forgiveness of sins (*Acts 3:19*).

In many ways, this is the same message we are taking to the world, even if the context has changed. The apostles were still in a Jewish setting, when instead of changing religions the people basically just had to “migrate” from the old covenant to the new one. As part of God's people, they had to accept the Messiah and experience the new birth that follows a true acceptance of Jesus.

Now, though the situation is different, the message is still essentially the same: Christ died for our sins, was resurrected, and He will return. This means, then, that we can find salvation in Him. Even in the context of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14, Jesus Christ crucified, Jesus Christ risen, and Jesus Christ returning must be the center of how we proclaim those messages.

“Of all professing Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world. The proclamation of the third angel's message calls for the presentation of the Sabbath truth. This truth, with others included in the message, is to be proclaimed; but the great center of attraction, Christ Jesus, must not be left out. It is at the cross of Christ that mercy and truth meet together, and righteousness and peace kiss each other. The sinner must be led to look to Calvary; with the simple faith of a little child he must trust in the merits of the Saviour, accepting His righteousness, believing in His mercy.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 156, 157.

## The Rise of Opposition

It was not long until the church's success aroused opposition from some Jerusalem leaders. The Jerusalem temple was run by the high priest and his associates, most of whom were Sadducees. The high priest was also the president of the Sanhedrin council, which in those days was composed mostly of Sadducees and Pharisees. Because the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, they were greatly disturbed that Peter and John were teaching that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Arrested by the temple guards, the apostles were put in custody until the following day, when they were brought before the council (*Acts 4:1–7*).

**Read** Acts 4:1–18. When asked by what authority they had been acting, how did Peter reply? What was the underlying message in what Peter said that the leaders would have found so threatening?

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The challenge about authority posed by the Jewish leaders suggests a concern for power. Peter, however, declared not only that the miracle had been performed in the name of Jesus but also that salvation comes from Him only. The apostles were before the highest Jewish body; yet, they were in the service of a much higher authority. These men were simple, unschooled Galilean fishermen; thus, their courage and eloquence struck those who were there. Although the leaders did not realize it, the point was that the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, exactly as Jesus had foretold (*Matt. 10:16–20*).

Without being able to deny the miracle—the healed man was also present so that all could see him—the Sanhedrin commanded the apostles to stop preaching. They feared the message as much as the increasing popularity of the movement. Failing to evaluate the evidence properly, they allowed prejudice and desire for self-protection to dictate their actions.

Peter's final words are among the most precious gems of the book of Acts: “ ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard’ ” (*Acts 4:19, 20, NKJV*).

**Think about the desire for power and how potentially dangerous it can be, at any level and in any context. As Christians called to be servants, why must we be careful about the lure of power?**

## Ananias and Sapphira

The pooling of goods in the early church was not compulsory; that is, it was not a formal condition of membership. Yet, there certainly were several examples of voluntary generosity that inspired the whole community. One such example was Barnabas (*Acts 4:36, 37*), who will play an important role later in the book.

However, there were also negative examples that threatened the unity of the church from within, right at a time when attacks from without had just begun.

**Read** Acts 5:1–11. What are the lessons of this story?

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Though Luke has not given us all the details, there is no question that the fundamental problem of Ananias and Sapphira was not the attempt to keep the money but the practice of deceit within the community. Their sin was not the result of an impulsive act but of a carefully laid plan, a deliberate attempt “to test the Spirit of the Lord” (*Acts 5:9, ESV*). They were not under the obligation to sell their property and give the money to the church. Thus, when they committed themselves to doing so, perhaps they were acting in their own interest only, maybe even trying to gain influence among the brethren with what appeared to be a commendable act of charity.

This possibility may help to explain why God punished them so severely. Even if the church’s communal life resulted from the conviction that Jesus was just about to come, an act like that of Ananias and Sapphira at such an early stage could disparage the importance of loyalty to God and become a bad influence among the believers. The fact that there is no mention of Ananias’s being given the chance to repent, as in the case of Sapphira (*Acts 5:8*), may be due only to the shortness of the account.

The bottom line is that, from the beginning to the end, they had acted sinfully, and sin is a serious matter in God’s eyes (*Ezek. 18:20, Rom. 6:23*), even if He does not always punish it immediately. In fact, that punishment is often deferred should constantly remind us of how gracious God is (*2 Pet. 3:9*).

**Why must we be careful about pushing the limits of grace, as these two early members of the church did?**

## The Second Arrest

If the apostles could be used to bring God’s judgment on sin, as in Ananias and Sapphira’s case, they could also be used to bring God’s grace on sinners. Their powerful healing ministry (*Acts 5:12–16*) was tangible evidence that God’s Spirit was working through them. That even Peter’s shadow, it was believed, could heal people is striking. The closest parallel in the Gospels is that of a woman who was healed by touching Jesus’ garment (*Luke 8:43, 44*). Luke, however, does not say that Peter’s shadow actually had healing power but that the people thought so. Yet, even if popular superstition was involved, God would still dispense His grace.

Notwithstanding, the more the apostles were filled with the Spirit, and signs and wonders multiplied, the more the religious leaders were filled with jealousy. This led them to arrest the apostles a second time (*Acts 5:17, 18*). It was only after their miraculous escape (*Acts 5:19–24*) and another bold speech by Peter, stressing that they should “obey God rather than men” (*Acts 5:29*), that some of the authorities began to consider the possibility that supernatural influences could be at work.

**Read Acts 5:34–39. How did Gamaliel try to dissuade the Sanhedrin from killing the apostles?**

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The Sanhedrin was controlled by the Sadducees, with the Pharisees forming an influential minority. Gamaliel was a Pharisee and a doctor of the law. He was so highly regarded among the Jews that he became known as “Rabban” (“our teacher”), rather than simply “Rabbi” (“my teacher”). Paul was one of his disciples (*Acts 22:3*).

Gamaliel recalled two other rebel movements in Israel’s recent history that had also attracted followers and caused turmoil. The leaders, however, were killed and their followers were completely dispersed. The lesson he drew was that if the Christian movement was of human origin, it would soon disappear. On the other hand, if it was a divine movement, as claimed by the apostles, how could they hope to withstand it? Gamaliel’s advice prevailed. The apostles were flogged and once again commanded not to speak in Jesus’ name.

**What does this story tell us about how needful and helpful good counsel can often be? How can we learn to be more open to getting counsel even when it may consist of what we don’t necessarily want to hear?**

**Further Thought:** “We are stewards, entrusted by our absent Lord with the care of His household and His interests, which He came to this world to serve. He has returned to heaven, leaving us in charge, and He expects us to watch and wait for His appearing. Let us be faithful to our trust, lest coming suddenly He find us sleeping.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 37.

“The people need to be impressed with the sacredness of their vows and pledges to the cause of God. Such pledges are not generally held to be as obligatory as a promissory note from man to man. But is a promise less sacred and binding because it is made to God? Because it lacks some technical terms, and cannot be enforced by law, will the Christian disregard the obligation to which he has given his word? No legal note or bond is more obligatory than a pledge made to the cause of God.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1056.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Among many other things, Jesus left two immediate legacies to the disciples: the expectation of His soon return and a worldwide mission. How should these two factors impact our sense of mission and the call to preach the gospel to the world?
- 2 Someone once said: “We should be ready as if Jesus would come today but continue working [in the mission of the church] as if He would take another hundred years to come.” What wisdom is found in this sentiment, and how can we apply it to our calling in life?
- 3 Why must the life, death, resurrection, and return of Jesus be central to all that we preach? Or look at it like this: What good is anything we preach without these events?
- 4 What should the story of Ananias and Sapphira teach about just how difficult it is for us to know the hearts of others, either for good or for evil?
- 5 Who are some modern-day Gamaliels whom you know? Or, perhaps, are you in a position to play that role for others? Either way, in class share examples about how the giving or the receiving of wise counsel did some good. What lessons can we learn from these accounts?

## Too Scared to Adopt

By SANG SOOK PARK

Since I was a little girl, I wanted to adopt a child. The desire remained strong after I got married and raised a son, but I feared I wasn't qualified.

Finally, I filled out the paperwork. "Send me a child whom I can handle," I prayed. "Give me this sign that the adopted child is from You: Make the first child I meet the one whom You want me to adopt."

This was my prayer for two and a half months. Then the orphanage sent a two-year-old girl, Bomini. But when she arrived, she just glared at me. I wanted to win her heart, so I gave her food and a doll. But she flung down the doll, and she wouldn't allow me to touch her. I sent Bomini back to the orphanage.

"I'm too scared to adopt," I told my husband.

But I sensed God saying, "What happened to all your prayers and request for a sign that the first child would be chosen by Me?" I wept and told God, "I'm too scared to live with this child."

But then I changed my prayer. "If I'm supposed to take this child, give me confidence and the assurance that You will raise her," I prayed. "If I'm not supposed to adopt her, remove this heavy burden that I have to adopt a child."

I prayed this for five days. On the fifth day, I read 2 Samuel 24:14 during my devotions and realized that this was the answer. In this verse, King David says, "I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are great."

I remembered that God always had led me and I knew He would continue to care for my family with great mercy. I decided to fall into the hand of the Lord.

"Let's go get the child," I told my husband.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as we drove to the orphanage. I could still see those glaring eyes. Then I thought, *Wait, I'm going to meet this precious daughter of mine.* I prayed, "God, help us love her."



We waited a short time at the orphanage, and then Bomini entered the room. She quietly walked over to me and put her tiny hands into mine. It felt as if the Lord were holding my hands. I prayed, "I will lead this hand to heaven." And we went home.

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SANG SOOK PARK, 58, left, runs an adoption agency called Morning Calm Family, which has placed 238 children in 160 Adventist families in South Korea over the past decade. She has adopted four children.