

*Dedication and Disaster*

**Acts 4:32-5:11**

John Breon

So far, it's been pretty much smooth sailing for the early church. They experienced the power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. They were mocked a bit, but that led to proclaiming the message to a large crowd and thousands of people joining them in following Jesus. Miracles and healings were taking place. They were a community united in faith and practice. Things got a little bumpy when Peter and John were arrested by the Temple authorities and brought before the Council. But the Council's threats didn't have teeth and the apostles were released and continued their ministry. God answered the church's prayers in powerful ways.

Luke gives another summary of the church's life and unity. The Jesus followers were "one in heart and mind." They were devoted to each other. They shared a common experience of following Jesus and being filled with the Holy Spirit. They were united in believing in Jesus and believing God's word in Scripture and the good news about Jesus. The apostles "gave powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (v. 33, New Living Translation).

The Jesus people demonstrated their unity by sharing their possessions. God's grace was upon them and at work in them in such a way that there were no needy persons among them. If there was a need, someone with the resources helped meet the need. Possessions, land, even houses were sold. People then brought the money they made from such sales and placed it at the apostles' feet. The apostles then oversaw the distribution of resources to anyone who was in need.

As an example of this practice, Luke tells about Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus. The Levites were Temple assistants. They worked with the priests and helped lead worship and care for the temple. Originally, Levites didn't own land, but by this time, they apparently did. Joseph was from Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean Sea. Perhaps he was born there and later moved to Jerusalem. Or, it's likely he had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost and was in the crowd that heard the Jesus followers declaring God's mighty

deeds in various languages. Maybe he listened to Peter's Pentecost message and was one of those who responded by repenting and being baptized in Jesus' name.

Now he's part of the fellowship and he joins others in selling property to help those believers who are in need. At some point, the apostles start calling him Barnabas. Name changes are significant in Scripture. They often mark a change in life and character. Joseph's nickname reflects his character: "Son of Encouragement" or "the Encourager." We first see him encouraging others through his generosity. Later, we'll see him encouraging Saul of Tarsus during his conversion, encouraging the church to welcome Saul as a member, encouraging various groups of believers. Barnabas will be a major supporting character in the story of Acts.

So we see this wonderful unity and generosity and encouragement. We'd like to be part of a church like that. It's all good news. It's all positive. But Luke is honest and he gives us another example of what was going on in the early church. This time it's a negative example related to the practice of selling property and bringing money to be shared with others.

It's the story of a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who also sell property and bring money to the apostles to be distributed. But they agree to keep some money for themselves and not to give the whole price they received. Peter realizes that each of them has been caught up in Satan's trap. They've lied not just to the church, but to the Holy Spirit. They've lied to God and tried to test the Spirit of the Lord. When their deceit is exposed, they each drop dead—first Ananias, then, three hours later, his wife Sapphira. Great fear seized everyone who heard about this.

This is a hard story. I admit I've kind of dreaded preaching on it. But we can't avoid the difficult sections in the Bible and we can't make them say just what we want them to say.

A character in one of Frederick Buechner's novels is a Bible teacher who has a habit of taking difficult passages of Scripture and making them easier to handle. He makes up insights from cultural background or the original languages and interprets the Scriptures to mean almost the opposite of what they really mean. He removes the difficulty from the difficult passages. He softens the hard words of Scripture. The narrator in

the novel realizes that this man's interpretation is hogwash (*The Book of Bebb* 34-37, 48).

Tempting as that approach might be, it will lead us away from truth instead of toward it. Ellsworth Kalas says about the account of Ananias and Sapphira:

This is a troublesome story. Hearing or reading it you may have told yourself that you can't believe God would strike somebody dead; it seems unfair and violent. Well, I read the Bible by the rule that it isn't my job to make it conform to my taste, but to try instead to see what it is saying and how therefore I ought to live. (*The Story Continues* 39)

So how do we hear this whole section of Scripture (Acts 4:32-5:11) as it's intended to be heard? And what does it say to us now?

*The Holy Spirit creates unity among God's people.* The Spirit draws us together and unites us. We have a common faith in God through Jesus Christ. We have a common experience of grace, repentance, forgiveness, and new life in Jesus. We have a common belief in God's word and in the gospel that centers on the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

*Generosity is a result of the Holy Spirit's work.* There are these amazing signs of the Holy Spirit's presence and power. We've seen the move of the Spirit represented in something like wind, flame, and an earthquake. We've heard the Spirit-enabled followers of Jesus declaring in many languages the great things God has done. We've seen a lame man healed in the name of Jesus. We've seen bold apostles proclaiming Jesus to crowds and to the ruling Council.

Now we see followers of Jesus enabled by the Holy Spirit to give up clinging to their possessions. They begin to share generously. This holding property in common and sharing everything may be almost as challenging to us as understanding what happened to Ananias and Sapphira is. But we can see that Christian unity is very practical. It meets physical and material needs. The new life of God's kingdom sets us free from the need to accumulate lots of stuff, especially when we have brothers and sisters who have nothing. Later we'll see some of the challenges that arose with this

arrangement. And, we don't see every Christian community in Acts or the rest of the New Testament holding all things in common like this. But we do see the example of making our possessions available to be used by God. We hear the call to be generous in gratitude for all that we have received. We know that all our stuff is not really ours, but we're to be stewards or managers of God's property. Barnabas is a good example for us in this.

*We can all be encouragers.* What's more motivating—being put down and ridiculed or being encouraged and helped? Think about the best coaches or supervisors you've had. How did they motivate you? An encourager can still challenge us and push us to do our best. But we also know that they're alongside us and will help us be our best and do our best. As you continue reading through Acts, notice how Barnabas is with Saul/Paul, how he encourages the church in Antioch, how he sticks up for John Mark. Let's be encouragers for the gospel, for the kingdom of God.

*Thinking about Ananias and Sapphira,* we can note that it doesn't say that God killed them. It says they fell down and died. Having their sin, their deceit, exposed may have been such a shock that it stopped their hearts.

Whatever killed Ananias and Sapphira, we have to acknowledge that their deaths were judgment on their sin—or the result of judgment on their sin. God is not a nice, grandfatherly, "Teddy Bear" of a God. God is love. But God is love in a way that goes beyond our understanding of love. The Bible says that God is love (1 John 4:16). It doesn't say that God is holiness or God is justice. Those are some of the characteristics of God. God who is love is holy, righteous, and just. Rich Mullins sang about "the reckless raging fury that they call the love of God" ("*Love of God*" on *Never Picture Perfect*, 1989).

We don't approach God casually or with pretension or deceit. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was not that they kept back some of the money they made. Peter says that the property was theirs and the proceeds were theirs and they could do what they wanted with them. This shows us that the generous sharing of the early church was voluntary. But Ananias and Sapphira's sin was in lying and deceit. They were trying to look more generous than they really were.

Hypocrisy is an ugly word that gets thrown at Christians. And sometimes we deserve it. There are people who lie about their motivation for being part of the church. They try to use it for social prestige or political power or business connections. Hypocrisy is deadly. When we try to use religion to deceive others, we first deceive ourselves. Hypocrisy scrambles our values. Ananias and Sapphira may have been impressed by the admiration Barnabas received instead of seeing the beauty of his character and of his deed. They were looking for approval from the apostles instead of from God. Again, Ellsworth Kalas is insightful here:

A hypocrite is an *intentional* deceiver: someone who tries to hide behind religion and to use it for its benefits without fulfilling its demands. This is nothing like those Christians who try faithfully to live godly lives but who fall short of their own earnest efforts. (41-42)

Intentional deception was at the heart of what went wrong with Ananias and Sapphira. Their deaths show how serious a matter that is. And they illustrate what hypocrisy really is.

But don't accept the label of hypocrite if you're really devoted to knowing Jesus and becoming more like him by God's grace—and you mess up. Don't accuse someone else of hypocrisy just because they sometimes fail to do the right thing. There's a difference between pretending to be a follower of Jesus and really being committed to following him in the power of the Holy Spirit, but struggling. Messing up when you're trying to do the right thing is different from intentionally deceiving others and even thinking you can pull one over on God.

Don't turn away because you're afraid you won't be able to tell the truth and keep your promises to God and to the church. Instead, trust God. The power of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus that we've been talking about is available to help us be true and faithful, to be the kind of community God wants, to be generous.

As we receive Communion today, truly and earnestly repent of your sins. Let the prayer of confession really mean something. But also, hear the words of assurance that you are forgiven in the name of Jesus. Accept the

freedom God gives you in Christ. Enter into the freedom and new life God makes available in the Holy Spirit. Be encouraged by God's love, grace, mercy, and faithful promises.