

The Dreadful Fear of God! Acts 5:1-11

Well, we have just gone through and looked at a snap shot of the early workings of the church. It is probably by this time a couple of months old, and we saw the glory and love they have for Christ and one another. And the key verses for understanding the last paragraph and character of the church is verse 33, **“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”** Notice here there is both great power of the disciples as they taught the truth of the resurrection, and then we have the outcome of that great power, and that is the great grace of God. And an example of that great grace was seen in their sacrificial giving to ensure that all were taken care of. An example of that giving was Barnabas who voluntarily sold a parcel of land and willingly took the proceeds and laid it at the feet of the apostles to be used as any had need. We never think that planned giving is actually a grace given by God. God works in our hearts and lives to give up what we have in order to further his kingdom purposes, and again, this is not done artificially but from the heart.

Then we come to the beginning of chapter five, which is related to chapter 4. You can see the connection with the first word: **“but.”** This is a contrast between Barnabas’ giving and the giving of a couple named Ananias and Sapphira. And it also contrasts the great grace that came on the church against the great fear that came on all in verse 5 of this chapter. Here in the beginning of this chapter, we have God judge and kill this couple for a lie they told about a parcel of land that they sold. The great grace of the last chapter seems to be missing, and we might wonder, what is going on here? And let me make a few comments before we begin. One is that this judgement seems out of place in many churches today. Believers generally are so light on sin. It is one of the reasons why we are not enthusiastically telling others of both the cost of sin and to flee to Jesus. In fact, in our churches today this seems over the top. God would strike this couple down for a simple white lie? It seems to be out of place with our modern day thoughts of God who loves us and would never bring any of the consequences of our sin upon us. In fact, God’s major joy right now is to make us happy, healthy and wealthy. For many this is what the Old Testament was made up of. But we have been delivered from those scary stories of the Old Testament.

So, you will not hear many sermons of Acts 5:1-11. You will hear many sermons about the angel letting the disciples out of prison, or even the great grace of the last chapter, but not this text that deals with the great fear of the people, and who the people are fearing is none other than God. God is not safe. And this is what I love about Scripture. It is brutally honest. This is history. This happened just as sure as the death and resurrection of Jesus, just as all the events of Pentecost. This is history. This really happened. Luke the writer of this Book, writes by divine inspiration what God wants written. And what is written is for our good and even for our warning. It would be easy to say, let’s give a positive message and leave this whole incident out. And where the healing of the man at the gate beautiful highlights the healing we have of our sins through Jesus Christ. This incident highlights that there is a God we have to come face to face with that knows the secrets, knows everything about our lives, and there is a judgment. And that final judgment before a holy God is so much more fearful than anything that we would ever face in this life. It is more fearful than even physical death

itself. God is a God never to be trifled with. God is the immense God of all worth and glory and splendour. And make sure you know that everyone here this morning will one day meet this God. But also, judgement and discipline take place in the household of faith. You cannot hide your sin from God and he in his love and holiness will not tolerate it. The question that we need to grapple with is how lightly do we take sin in our lives? Do we see sin, my personal sin, as utterly offensive to the very person of God? This whole incident is a reminder of the gravity of sin and the cost of sin, and it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

There are other questions that go along with that main question, such as: were these individuals here saved? Did they go off into eternal judgment? Why doesn't God strike people down today the same way he did here? How do we reconcile this passage with what we are taught about God - "God is love"? And we will seek to answer those questions while trying to bring out the weightiness of our sin, our hidden sin, before an awesome God. It is a fearful thing whether we realize it or not if you take sin lightly. God is ever present. All of life is before an all-holy God. So I want us to walk through the passage this morning, and then I am going to seek to draw some conclusions from it.

1. We need to see the meaning of the passage. Vv. 1-11.

Now I think many people reading this story feel a sense of compassion or empathy or almost sorrow for this couple. Again, it seems only like a little lie they spoke. No biggy. Who hasn't lied? Don't we all try to impress others at various times in our lives? And I believe the trouble is we do not see or even try to see the whole event through God's lens, through what is revealed in the Scripture, and really understand how heinous and diabolical sin truly is. The more we see sin from God's viewpoint, which really is the only viewpoint. Ours is a demented point of view. We need to start to see how awful sin really is.

In verse 1, we see this couple, and like what Barnabas and others in the church, they had land, and they sold that land because there was need in the church. The problem comes in verse 2, and notice they are both complicit here, **"and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet."** Now where is the sin here? And it is those words "kept back." Now please understand, selling a piece of property and deciding not to give all to the church was not sin. And Peter says as much in verse 4, **"While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God."** He says you were under no obligation to sell it, and then after selling it, it was at your disposal to do with whatever you wanted to do with the proceeds. You could give it all or give a part of the proceeds or none.

So what is the problem? And it is really with those two words in verse 2, which says, "kept back." In fact the same Greek word is used over in Titus 2:9-10 in how slaves are to function with their masters. And see if you can pick out the Greek word translated "kept back" in this passage, **"Bondservants are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the**

doctrine of God our Savior.” It is right there in verse 10, “not pilfering.” Here the command is slaves are not to be stealing from their masters.

So think of what is happening here. Look at the question and answer Peter asks of Sapphira in verse 8, “**And Peter said to her, ‘Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.’ And she said, ‘Yes, for so much.’**” And listen to the inditement brought against Ananias in verse 3, “**But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?’**” Here is the sin: they have pilfered from God himself. They have played the hypocrite. No doubt they seen the adulation of people like Barnabas and they wanted it for themselves. So even though they did not have to give the full amount to God and his people, they lied, and the seriousness of that lie is they lied and swindled God out of what they had promised they would give him. This is no light matter. They care more about how they were perceived by others than God. They had cheated God and defamed his name. And what this passage always indicates is there is more than this natural world. There is a God who is present everywhere, and know every aspect of our lives. Don’t live as if he does not exist. Don’t live as if sin is no big deal just because others do not see your sin.

God is a God who will not be mocked. He will bring sin to light. He will expose you one way or another when we play with sin. He loves us too much not to bring consequences to bear in one way or another. Just before we go on and apply this passage, let me name one other thing of theological note. And that is, we have seen God the Father through this book, and Jesus’ deity is professed through all the statements in this book calling him Lord. And here is an amazing statement about the third Person of the Trinity. This is the other Comforter Jesus said that he would send from the Father. He is none other than God. Notice again, Ananias has not simply lied to men. Look how he words it in verse 3, “**Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit.**” Now look at the end of verse 4, “**You have not lied to man but to God.**” So based on these parallel statements, who is the Spirit. He is none other than God.

We as Christians are monotheists. But that does not mean we have the same God as other monotheist faiths. The most unique teaching about the Christian’s God is he is a Triune God. There is one God in being, and yet three distinct persons. It is a mystery and beyond our ability to comprehend that puts God in a category all on his own. The Holy Spirit is often called the Spirit of God, so he is deity. It is easy to think this is the power of God, but when you see personality or personhood, like here, you cannot lie to some inanimate power, you realize he is deity. We celebrate our God who is a category all on his own and he is uncontainable. Only this triune God can be the perfect, one God and holy God of heaven. There is no one like him. And you cannot be a Christian and deny the uniqueness of our God. He is three distinct persons in one being of God. Marvel at our God.

But let us get back to this text, and let us see if we can draw some conclusions from it.

2. Conclusions and lessons we can draw.

Now it would be easy to skip over this whole incident and just say there’s is nothing to learn here. But we have to remember why we have histories in the Bible.

When we read about Israel coming out of Egypt to the promise land and how most of them perished in the wilderness, we read in 1 Corinthians 10:5-6, **“Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.”** These histories are examples for us that we might not go in a faulty direction and not honour God. So this section is for us as the professed people of God and is given for us as an example. It is so easy to think that we are saved and justified through the work of Christ, and nothing will ever separate me from God that sin is no longer a big deal, especially in the believer’s life. In fact, some expositors actually try to downplay the significance of this. When Ananias and Sapphira heard that their sin was discovered and revealed by God, they died not by the hand of God but just with the shock of the news, and all that Luke is doing us is informing us of the history. The problem is that the fear of God gripped the whole community of believers. They understood the deaths of these two as deriving from the hand of God. This was his judgment. He has the right to judge whomever he wants.

So this is a very shocking and sobering passage that we would do well to meditate on. And seek to learn from. One of the lessons that is so evident is the seriousness of sin. You cannot look at this passage without seeing that. In fact, the gospel we celebrate every single week indicates the seriousness of sin. Sin is so great and so awful that only the coming of God in human flesh, dying that dreadful death in our stead could give us a holy standing before God. Sin is serious business. And the church is to take sin seriously. Ananias and Sapphira thought they could take sin lightly. What they wanted from others was reputation and applause. Their sin in one word was hypocrisy. They cared more about what others thought than God. And the question so many ask is if they were believers or not? And let me tell you the commentaries are split on it. Some say they were lost. They were Satan inspired individuals who came to take and rob the great power and grace of the early church. God protected the church. And we know Satan can appear as an angel of light. What better way than to give his followers prestige in the church. Look at these impressive givers. But others see them as believers who got swept up and blinded in their sin. We read of some who were shaming others at the Lord’s Table and were not examining their hearts in 1 Corinthians 11:30, **“That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.”** These were believers who got caught up in hypocrisy.

But here is the thing: there is no way to tell in the passage. What the passage is indicating is the seriousness of sin. And it indicates God knows your sin. God knows when you are living with unconfessed and unrepentant sin, God will expose it and bring it to light. He will not let his church be weakened and his name be mocked. And please, I beg you - never take sin lightly in your life. Sin will seek to control you and take you down a path that you never thought you would go. God in his love will expose and bring consequences to bear for your good but also the good of his people. Sin is so subtle. Maybe they saw the need in the church, and decided to sell and give a portion, and they were thankful they would meet the needs of others, but that began to morph. I want others to see how committed I am to Christ, and somewhere along the line in their heart it became more about them and them being loved and respected than loving God and loving others through sacrifice. Sin is subtle and wants to own you.

Another lesson we can learn is the cunning wickedness of Satan. You can see the strength of the church, and the glory of Christ's sacrifice being lived out by his people. And one of the greatest ploys in how to weaken the church and in some cases kill a local church is not from the outside. We will see all the way through this book and even in church history that persecution often causes the church to grow. But often the greatest damage is done by those inside rather than outside. And it is incredible that here we are told that Satan filled Ananias. It is the same language to describe his hold over Judas in betraying Jesus. And it means simply to control. Listen to the description of Satan in 1 Peter 5:8, "**Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.**" Now how does he devour us? And the answer so often is to cause us to lose our confidence in Jesus Christ either through questioning the merits of Christ or through weakening the testimony of Jesus.

And you can imagine how this hypocrisy would have weakened the early church when it finally came to light, especially if God didn't intervene. Every sacrificial act of love that would have been done would have been questioned and looked upon with suspicion. Do they really love God? Do they really care about others? You look at criticism of God's people by those inside and it is alive and well. And maybe we criticize so much and question the sincerity of others because we are playing the hypocrite, and we do not even know the influence our great adversary is having on our lives. Maybe our Sunday best is different than our Monday attire. Satan is crafty. So often his ways are subtle and slow, and if no one else knows then it is all right. The call here is for all of us. Don't follow Satan. Don't play the hypocrite. The call is to follow and seek to make much of God. Don't pretend you are someone you are not. Don't play for appearances. Don't play for the praise of men but the praise of God.

There is another thing that we can learn, and that is God's absolute holiness. God's holiness is his complete majestic otherness. This is what separates God from us. It not only speaks of his moral purity but God is above and worthy of all worship and obedience. That is what makes this sin so terrible. It is an affront to his holiness. It is false worship of the one true God. Again, it is amazing that liberal scholars will say that the God of the New Testament is different from the God of the Old Testament. But in both Testaments we are met with an utterly holy God. Listen to the description of God in 1 Timothy 6:16, "**who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.**" Who is God? The One who is so high and pure and regal and majestic that he dwells in unapproachable light. No man in his mortality and sinfulness can stand in his presence. They would be consumed in an instance.

Now some will ask, if God is so holy, then why do we not see individuals who are playing the hypocrite in the church struck down all the time or at least more often? And it is a great question. We realize what we deserve. But there is only one answer that we can come up with and that is the patience of God. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "**The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.**" But here is the lesson. None of us have the right to count on that patience of God. None of us can muse in our minds, no one knows about my sin, I'll just play the part and some

time in the future I will repent. There is no doubt that this couple did not think they would meet their Maker that very day. In fact, they thought they would be honoured by others, even by Peter and the apostles. Maybe given a new name like Barnabas. Today is the day of repentance. Don't trifle with a holy God. Don't trifle and assume he is obligated to give you grace. Don't dishonour the worth and glory of the sacrifice of Christ. Don't act as if God does not know your secret life or does not exist. That is what a hypocrite does. Celebrate all that Jesus is for us.

Let me close by reading what Derek Thomas writes about this passage, "**Does the God of Acts 5 strike fear into your hearts? It did for these early Christians. Don't you think that when they went to bed that night, they were trembling a little at what God had done? If they slept at all, they arose the next day with a determination that they were not going to waste their lives. The business of being a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, is a serious one . . . As you read this passage about the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira, does it make you tremble? It should! It is a call to us to be serious about our faith. We need to walk before God in godly fear all our lives.**"