

God's Presence and Concern for His People

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Date: 13 October 2019

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[0 : 0 0] reflections from children about church. When asked Alan, age 10, when asked what his favorite part of church was, said, the end. Joel, age 4, when he started giggling and talking in church, his sister Angie, age 6, said, you're not supposed to talk out loud in church, otherwise you'll get in trouble. See those two men standing at the back there? They are the hushers.

Well, I wonder what your view of church is. When you hear the word church, what comes to mind?

Do you think of it a place where you have to be quiet, otherwise you'll get in trouble? Or something that you must endure until the end? Or perhaps just another club you attend when it suits? Or do you see the church as something more? Well, today we come to another summary of the early church. Luke gave us a summary back in chapter 2, which mentions lots of the same things we'll see today. I've put a table on the back of your outlines to show you the similarities between the two summaries. And you'll notice there are quite a few similarities between the two.

But you also notice that today's summary seems to be split in two. In between, we meet some members of the early church in the grey shaded part, Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira. And Luke's summary with his description of these members gives us a picture of the early church, which I think is helpful for us in terms of how we think about our church today. So we're at point one in your outlines and chapter four, verse 32 in your Bibles. It says, all the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

With great power, the apostles continue to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and literally great grace was upon them all. Here the believers were of one heart and mind.

[2 : 2 2] That is, they regarded themselves as one such that whatever possessions they owned, they considered as belonging to everyone. In other words, they willingly shared their stuff.

And what's more, it seems that God's presence was in the church, for he is dispensing his great power to his apostles and literally great grace upon them all. Luke will unpack the great power in the second part of his summary, where the apostles perform signs and wonders. But it's worth noting that God's grace here is mentioned just after the preaching of Jesus. For it's as we hear afresh about Jesus, that the Spirit gives us grace or moves in our hearts to be gracious to others. And that's what happens, verse 34. A great grace was upon them all, so that there were no needy persons among them.

For from time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. It's pretty extraordinary, isn't it? And now their fields and houses were likely their savings accounts and investment properties. And the poor here, sorry, the needy here, not necessarily the poor, but anyone who was in need at that moment. So if someone lost a job and needed money, for example, they would fall into this category. Whatever it was, from time to time, others cashed in their savings accounts, sold their assets to give to the needy in the church. It's an incredible commitment to each other, isn't it?

And if it unsettles us a bit, as it did me, then that's probably a good thing. Because we are so conditioned by our society not to sell and share, but to buy and accumulate, aren't we?

Of course, we're not to sell off so much that then we ourselves become needy. But it seems that God gives grace to enable us to be gracious to others, which suggests this is what he wants for his church, even us here today. For us, in light of his grace towards us, to be generous and gracious to those in need.

[4 : 56] I know that this actually happens here at H2D. I don't think anyone has sold fields or houses that I know of, though I do know of many who've given substantial bequests.

And we use some of that money for a benevolence fund to help people in need. I know of others who've given bits of money and food to help those in need, meals and the like. Other people have given even significant sums of money because they were able to. In some cases, \$1,000 and in a couple of cases I know of, \$10,000. In one case, I even know of a Christian family who gave someone at our church a car because they had none. Of course, if people don't tell us they are in need, then we cannot help them. And I realize that asking for help and even receiving it can be embarrassing, can't it?

We feel embarrassed. But we also, when we receive it, are greatly encouraged. Which is why Joseph is renamed Barnabas, the son of encouragement. Do you see verse 35 or 36?

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Here Luke interrupts his summary to give us a positive example of giving to those in need. Barnabas was a Jew, a Levite, probably converted on the day of Pentecost when he came from Cyprus to Jerusalem for the festival and heard the apostles preaching Jesus. And he is such an encouragement that the apostles decide he has to have a new name. Now imagine being such a genuine and generous encouragement that the church will get together and we've got to rename you. We've got to rename you Barnabas or Barnabelle. I think that's daughter of encouragement. But you get the point.

[6 : 59] Here is a positive example of giving to those in need. Yet we move now, or Luke moves now, from the positive to the negative. It's like our first reading, just as the ideal life in the garden is spoiled by Satan's temptation and a married couple's sin. So the ideal life in the church is spoiled by Satan's temptation and the sin of a married couple too, Ananias and Sapphira.

But it rightly leads to great fear. So at point 2, chapter 5, verse 1. Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property.

With his wife's full knowledge, he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't it the money at your disposal to do whatever you like? What made you think of doing such a thing?

You have not lied just to human beings, but to God. Now notice here that selling your land is not compulsory. You don't have to do it.

Verse 4, Peter says the land was theirs, implying, look, you're free to do whatever you like. You know, you and God know what your circumstances are. You don't have to do this. And then Peter says also in verse 4 that the money was at their disposal.

[8 : 32] They could give a little bit or none of it. It's all up to them. But it seems that this couple wanted a compliment like Barnabas. They wanted praise, it seems. So as verse 3 says, instead of one heart, they allowed Satan to fill their heart, presumably with envy, but certainly with deceit.

Because we're told twice in verse 3 and 4 that Ananias lied. He deceived. And so their sin was not a lack of generosity. Some churches preach this passage and they hammer people about giving money, but it wasn't their sin. They did give money. They were generous.

Rather, the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was deception. And I wonder if we are sometimes tempted to deceive in order to be praised too, you know, or perhaps save face.

Maybe not in terms of giving money, but perhaps in terms of caring. We might say, oh, I was going to ring you to see how you were going, when it never ever occurred to us ever to ring.

Or we might say in terms of what we believe, oh yeah, I believe the Bible is God's word, but then actually ignore parts of it and follow society's word. Now, hopefully we don't do that. But either way, all such deceit is ultimately against God.

[9 : 56] Did you notice that? Verse 3, Peter says that Ananias lied not to him, but to the Spirit. Or verse 4, he lied not just to human beings, but to God.

Why? Well, because God is present in his church, not just dispensing his grace, but also revealing the secrets of his people's hearts.

And in this case, judging too. Verse 5, When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.

Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body and carried him out and buried him. Now, in the previous verses, Peter asked Ananias four questions. Yet throughout it all, Ananias stayed silent.

He didn't interrupt in confession and fall down in repentance. And so now he fell down dead. But this is not an act of Peter, but an act of God, isn't it?

[10 : 56] It's a supernatural act. And it tells us that God is present amongst his people. And it happens again. Verse 7, About three hours later, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

Peter asked her, Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land? Here's your chance to fess up. But she doesn't. She sticks with the lie and says, Yes, that's the price.

Peter said to her, How could you conspire to test the spirit of the Lord? Listen, the feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door and they will carry you out also. And at that moment she fell down at his feet and died.

Then the young men came in and finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Notice Sapphira is given a chance to repent, but she sticks with her story and tests the spirit. That is, she provokes the spirit. And the spirit acts in judgment, doesn't he?

[12 : 00] She falls at Peter's feet, dead, the very place they put the money. And great fear seizes the church. This is actually the first time that Luke uses the word church in all his writings.

And what a time to use it. Welcome to church, everyone. That reminds me of Alex, age seven, who was staring at a plaque in the foyer of a church. The plaque had the name of soldiers who fought for their country.

And as the pastor passed by, Alex asked him, What is this? And the pastor replied, Well, it's a memorial to all the young men and women who died in the service. Then Alex said rather shakily, Which service, the 9 or 10 a.m.?

But Ananias and Sapphira actually died in the service. Didn't they? So to speak. And again, this is an act of God which shows he is present amongst his people.

Not just to give grace, but also to judge the secrets of their hearts. Now, thankfully, God doesn't seem to act in the same supernatural and severe way today. Though I must say, I know of a pastor in New South Wales who covered up an affair that one of his staff had with a youth group girl.

[13 : 15] Whenever church members tried to talk to him about disciplining this staff member, removing him from ministry, this senior minister bullied them and told them to be quiet.

Divide the church caused great havoc. People were leaving disillusioned. I have a sister at this church. But just as he was about to fight the professional standards unit who were investigating the issue, the day before he was to meet with them, he literally fell down and died.

The official cause was a heart attack, but who knows the real cause? Even if this was God's judgment, I'm not saying it is, but it's very coincidental. It's not common today, is it?

But it certainly was in Acts. Why? Well, because this was the beginning of the church. So just as there were supernatural miracles, so there were supernatural judgments, both of which were meant to show that this new gathering, that's what the word church means, by the way, gathering, this gathering was no ordinary one.

It was God's gathering. Even if the Jewish authorities denied it, the supernatural validated it. Of course, after 2,000 years, the apostles are clearly no longer with us, and people know the church is God's gathering, or at least claims to be.

[14 : 35] I do worry about some. But we don't have much of the supernatural, because it's not the beginning of the church now. Yet the purpose of the judgment back then was to cause great fear amongst the church.

Did you notice that? We told it twice, verse 5 and verse 11. Great fear sees the whole church. This fear, although it is great, it's not meant to be terror and dread, such that everyone flees church because they all stay, rather it's a healthy, reverent fear of God that treats God with caution and awe, such that they take sin seriously and seek to be holy.

And I wonder if this is what we're also concerned to see at HTD. And not just great grace from God that moves us to generously give to each other in need, but also great fear of God that moves us to be holy, set apart for Him.

Do we seek to sit under God's word with a healthy, reverent fear, such that we listen and try and obey? Do we pray for our church to fear God and be holy?

I asked my Bible study group last week when the last time was that they prayed for us to be holy and to fear God. And as soon as I asked the question, I realized I can't remember the last time I prayed that either.

[16 : 08] But this is what God is concerned that we be. Those who have a healthy fear of Him and rightly and joyfully seek to be holy. Well, Luke returns now to his summary and starts to unpack the great power that accompanied the apostles' preaching.

So we're at point three now and verse 12, chapter five, verse 12. The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people and all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's colonnade.

No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. And our Solomon's colonnade was a huge area, public area.

I remember the temple itself was massive. So I think on the next slide, I've got a scale model of the temple and you can see it in relation to the city of Jerusalem. It dominates, doesn't it? It's massive.

And on the next slide, that's Solomon's colonnade. It's the first row across when you walk in on that side of the temple. You can also see the beautiful gate where Peter and John met the lame man back in chapter three.

[17 : 22] And so that's where the church met, in that undercover area. On the next slide is an artist's impression of it, just to give you kind of size of scale, people's.

It's quite a massive area, isn't it? I think it's from the wrong perspective. Solomon's colonnade was the other covered walkway. But that's where the church met, in this kind of public place.

And this is where the apostles would have continued testifying about the risen Jesus, chapter 4, verse 33, with great power. In Acts, the word power is always linked with the miraculous.

And so as they preached about Jesus, they would also perform miracles amongst the church, presumably with the public looking on. But the public did not dare join them, verse 13, under the colonnade.

They kept their distance. It seems that while these supernatural miracles validated this group as being from God and caused the public to hold the church in high regard, it also caused the public to keep their distance.

[18 : 28] And yet, we're also told in verse 14, nevertheless, more and more, in fact, it's literally more than ever, men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

And as a result of the miracles, the signs and wonders, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on the beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by.

Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed. And so while the miracles kept people at a distance, such that they preferred to bring their sick to the streets instead, people still became Christians, didn't they?

How? Well, remember what the apostles were doing with this great power. They were performing signs and wonders as, chapter 4, verse 33, they were testifying to the risen Lord Jesus.

They were continuing to preach the gospel, not just in the temple, but wherever they went. And so it seems as the apostles went out in the streets to heal these people, they would also testify about Jesus, how Jesus died to pay for our sins and rise again as Lord so that all who believe in him might be saved from judgment, have the guarantee of life eternal.

[20 : 00] So, verse 14, as they preached more than ever, which means more than the 3,000 in chapter 2 and more than the 5,000 in chapter 3, more than all that, more than ever, people believed in the Lord Jesus and then joined the church.

You see, it was the preaching that converted them. The miracles by themselves caused many to come to Jerusalem, yes, but to keep their distance from the church, the temple.

And so we need not worry about having no apostles today who have great power to do signs and wonders. Sometimes we wish, if only, you know, we'd have someone to do that for our family and friends, then surely they would believe.

But that's not actually what causes these people to believe, it seems. It causes them to keep their distance, actually. Rather, it's the preaching of the risen Jesus that converts and saves.

And that's what we are to continue to do as a church. Whereas the great power of the apostles with their signs and wonders were historical one-offs designed to validate the church, but also teach us things about God.

[21 : 08] Things like how God is present in his church. You see, Luke's purpose here is not just to show us how sin threatens the church. Some point to the external threat of persecution, like last week, and now the internal threat of deception this week.

And it's true, such deception is dangerous. As one commentator put it, falsehood ruins fellowship. But Luke interrupts his summary to primarily show us that God is present in his church.

Because that's what we see throughout the whole passage. That's the theme that runs all the way through. We see God's presence, for example, by the way he dispenses great grace to his people, like Barnabas, to be generous to those in need.

We see his presence, by the way he tells Peter the secrets of Ananias and Sapphira's hearts. I mean, how else do Peter know? We see his presence, by the way we're told that they lied to God as though God was there.

Then he shows his presence, by the way he judges supernaturally, such that great fear of God grips the church. And he shows his presence as he gives great power to his apostles to perform signs and wonders.

[22 : 23] And then adding even more men and women to his church as they preached about his son. And so I take it Luke's purpose is to show that this church is not just another social group or sports club, rather it's nothing less than the dwelling place of God.

And I wonder, do we have such a high view of church? You see, God is with us by his spirit, working as individuals, yes, working in our consciences wherever we go, that's true.

But he's even more so with us as we gather together as his church. For this is the goal of God's mission, to gather more and more people together in Christ as church.

In fact, church is where we are heading. Heaven is described as God dwelling with his people and us with him gathered together around the throne. That's church. church. This is why it matters how we treat one another, why we ought to remember God's grace to us and be moved to show grace to one another, especially giving to those in need.

That's why it matters how we live amongst one another, why we ought to rightly fear God, that we might joyfully live holy lives. For this is no Mickey Mouse kind of gathering.

[23 : 44] no matter what the world says, this is the church of the living God, which he bought by the blood of his son, in which he dwells by his spirit.

Indeed, God's presence is in his church. If that's the case, which it is, then it makes this gathering you are in now greater than any gathering you will be part of this week or this year.

And so it's a gathering worth continuing to make every effort to be part of. So thank you for doing that. I know for many here it's not always easy to get to church week in and week out.

Well, someone told me this morning after a seven o'clock church that a four-year-old relative of theirs has a father who is a pastor.

And during church, one day, this four-year-old son called out in a loud voice, when is dad going to shut up? So let me shut up and finish with this.

[24 : 51] I asked at the start, how do you view church? Is it just another social group or sports club to you? Or is it nothing less than the very dwelling place of God?

Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, father, we do thank you that you love your church, that you gave your son to gather us together as church and that you are with us in church.

Father, we pray that you would help us to have a high view of the church, of our church here at HTD. Help us, we pray, to be moved by your grace, to be gracious to those in need.

Help us to have great fear, a healthy fear of you that seeks to be holy. Help us in this, we pray, knowing that you are with us every Sunday.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.