

The Reality of Opposition Within

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 00] We turn now to our reading for this evening, which is in Acts chapter 4, and that's page 912 in the Vista Bibles.

And we're picking up where we left off last week. So in the first half of Acts chapter 4, we saw Peter and John being dragged before the council, attempted to be silenced.

But in the face of that opposition, they kept proclaiming, and they prayed that God would give them boldness to keep proclaiming Christ. And so we pick it up in chapter 4, verse 32.

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul. And no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

And with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of land or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

[1 : 21] And it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. 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.

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?

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 men, but to God. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.

[2 : 34] The young man rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. After an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

And Peter said to her, Tell me whether you sold the land for so much? And she said, Yes, for so much. But Peter said to her, How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out. Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last.

When the young men came in, they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us this evening. Amen. Good. Well, please do turn back to Acts chapter 4.

[3 : 49] And we're looking at verses 32 to chapter 5, verse 11. Now, this is a passage that rattles us, or at least it ought to rattle us.

It begins with real meaningful unity amongst God's people. Read there from verse 32, that the early church were of one heart and one soul.

And that looked like, on the ground, a sharing of material possessions and great generosity to one another. Some of those in the church were selling their property, giving all the proceeds to the church.

Hugely encouraging to see the growth of the gospel, not just numerically, but in depth, as these young Christians sought to serve and love one another in the early days of the church.

It's all going rather well. Yes, there is the real and hard opposition from outside the church. We saw that last week. But it did not hinder the progress of the gospel.

[4 : 54] We saw the gospel went on regardless. Things are going well until chapter 5, verse 1. It's a chapter that begins with a bus that stops us in our tracks.

It makes for uncomfortable reading, doesn't it? It's uncomfortable because it shows that the opposition to the gospel isn't just out there somewhere, but also hostility to the gospel was there in the midst of the church.

Satan's tactics don't stop at the front door. He will infiltrate. He will seek to destroy from within. And that is exactly what we see in evidence in our passage this evening.

Peter, the apostle in chapter 5, verse 3, he sees the root of Ananias' deception resting with Satan himself. Look what he says there.

Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie? That is the key thing here. Satan is at work in the church seeking to disrupt and destroy. John Stott puts it this way.

[6 : 03] If the devil's first tactic was to destroy the church by force from without, his second was to destroy by falsehood from within. It makes for uncomfortable reading, not just because it exposes the reality of human sinfulness, but also because we see clearly God's fearsome judgment.

It is a passage that rattles us. Now, if you had been in Luke's shoes as you were writing this account, I think we might have been tempted to skip over this account, don't you?

It's a bit embarrassing. It shows deceit and weakness at the very heart of the early Christian church. Why would you include that? It's really not the sort of thing you want to draw your attention to, is it?

But Luke does include it. He wants those who read his account, and that includes you and I here today, he wants us to be clear about the reality of gospel opposition within the church.

Satan's plans consist of hostility outside, yes, but also deception from within the church. Luke wants us to be realistic about that fact.

[7 : 23] And he also wants us to be clear about the seriousness of deceitful sin within the church too. It's very serious indeed. And God will not be fooled.

He will not be deceived. So we are to watch and guard our own hearts, lest we fall for the devil's schemes and be used by him in his futile attempt to disrupt the progress of the gospel.

So then two key points this evening as we look at this together. Firstly, we see the shocking reality of opposition within. The shocking reality of opposition within.

The final paragraph of chapter 4 sets the scene for what is to follow. And we see there in chapter 4 that it was a common practice at the time for folk to sell off property, to sell their possessions, and bring their proceeds to the feet of the apostles.

We see that there in verse 34 and 35. There was great sharing of possessions and great care shown to one another in the church. Now let's be clear. This is not a manifesto for socialism.

[8 : 37] This was not an obligatory practice. And Luke is not including this here so that we would do exactly the same. The application of this passage is not, go out and sell your house and bring the proceeds to my feet.

But feel free. Although, to make a comment in passing, I'm sure that many of us do need, well as we're hearing this morning, we do need to review our giving, reflect upon our generosity to the church, to our fellow brothers and sisters.

We can never be too generous, can we? And such generosity and care to fellow Christians is surely a sign of Christian maturity. But that isn't the key point here.

That is not Luke's point. Luke is filling us in on the background to show what the believers were doing in that particular moment and to help us to make sense of what is about to happen.

And we get the example there of Joseph. There in verse 36, he was also called Barnabas. He was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, who sold a field that belonged to him and he brought the money and he laid it at the apostles' feet.

[9 : 49] Now this guy Barnabas, he was a good man. Every mention you have of him in the book of Acts is positive. He's a great encourager. And here again in Acts chapter 4, he sells the field, brings the proceeds, and lays them at the apostles' feet.

So this was a known practice at the time amongst the believers. They sold property, they brought all the proceeds to the apostles.

Barnabas was a first-class example of that. But then in chapter 5, the mood turns very sour indeed. We read about this couple, Ananias and his wife Sapphira.

And they, like many others, they sold a piece of property. So far, so good. But we read on. Now, in a sense, they were perfectly free to do that.

The apostle Peter says that in verse 4. Look, what he says there, verse 4. While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?

[11:07] In other words, you weren't under any obligation to sell the land in the first place. Nor were you under any obligation to bring all the proceeds to the church. But the issue was this.

There was a practice in the church at the time, as we've seen, of people selling property and bringing all the proceeds. Ananias was being deliberately misleading here.

To all those who saw what he did, to all those observing Ananias, it would have looked like Ananias was giving all the proceeds of the sale of the property, as everybody else had done.

But he was being deceitful. He kept back some of the proceeds for himself without telling anyone, apart from his wife. The problem was not how much he gave.

He could have given half the amount and clearly declared it. That would have been fine. But he lied.

He was deceitful. He lied about what he was giving. Peter puts his finger on the issue in verse 3.

[12:11] Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back for yourself some of the proceeds of the land? Look on to the end of verse 4.

You have not lied to men, but to God. The deceit is confirmed a few hours later. Sapphira is challenged by Peter.

Peter says to her, tell me whether you sold the land for so much. And she says, yes, we sold it for that much. And Peter said to her, how is it that you have agreed together to test the spirit of the Lord?

Now this is shocking. On face value, it looks innocuous enough. Just another couple in the church giving generously out of their possessions.

But the reality is shocking. The reality is serious. They lie not just to men, but to God. It was deliberate, premeditated.

[13:15] It was an effort to deceive those around them in the church. They presume they won't be found out. And in an effort to build their reputation, they make this grand, but fundamentally fraudulent gesture.

Why do they do that? Well, two reasons, I think. Well, firstly, and fundamentally, this is an outworking of the evil one and his schemes.

Peter gets to the heart of the diagnosis there in verse 3. Why has Satan filled your heart to lie? Behind what they do here, behind all opposition and hostility to the gospel, is Satan.

He is the father of lies. He is restless and unceasing in his attacks on the Christ and his people. And we need to be realistic and alert to the reality of his influence, alert to the lies he whispers in our ears, the desires he stirs up in our hearts, desires for reputation, desires to acquire.

But we all seem to realize that he can only go so far. Satan does not win in the end. But secondly, why did they do this?

[14:36] Well, it was simple and straightforward. Greed, wasn't it? Greed and pride. They were greedy. They kept back some of the proceeds of the sale of the land. They wanted it for themselves.

But more significantly, they were prideful. They wanted to be well thought of. They wanted people to think that they were more generous and spiritual than they actually were.

Ananias and Sapphira had spiritual ambitions. They perhaps saw the accolades and praise going Barnabas' way. They wanted some of the same, but just for a cut price.

And the human heart is unchanging, isn't it? Don't you recognize some of those tendencies in your own mind and heart? I certainly recognize them myself.

Who doesn't want the praise and the recognition of fellow men and women? Who doesn't want that? Who doesn't want to be well thought of? It's a dangerous desire, isn't it?

[15:40] James Philip, in his notes on this passage, says that for Ananias and Sapphira to be thought saintly was more important than actually being saintly. They wanted to be well thought of.

But they weren't willing to do the work behind it. And so they lied in full view of everyone. They lied. Now perhaps we might think as we read that account, if we were to see it, what's the big deal? So they lied a bit about how much they were giving. It's not that big a deal. Well, let's not forget the second thing we see in our passage, which is this.

We see the sober revelation of God's judgments. The demise of Ananias and Sapphira.

It's devastatingly brisk and deadly, isn't it? Look at verse 5. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last.

[16:42] Look on to verse 9. Behold, says Peter, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door and they will carry you out. Immediately, she fell down at his feet and breathed her last.

God was not fooled by their hypocrisy, their deception. And his fierce judgment reveals the sobering reality of their hypocrisy.

God will not be fools. And that is the great warning here, isn't it? We may fool men with our hypocrisy for a time, maybe even for a lifetime.

But in the end, we aren't able to fool the one whose opinion really matters. Luke records the Lord Jesus saying in one part, in part one of his account, that nothing is covered up that will not be revealed or hidden that will not be known.

Therefore, whatever you said in the dark shall be heard in the light. And what you've heard whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the rooftops. There can be no hiding from the Lord.

[17:52] He sees right through the hearts of men and women. He saw right through Ananias and Sapphira. He sees right through my heart and yours.

That is the sobering reality. But it must be said that this passage isn't a general warning against all sin.

Of course, the Bible teaches that sin is serious, that all are sinners and all fall short of the glory of God. But the particular sin here, the specific sin here in Acts chapter 5, the sin which we're particularly to guard in our own hearts is this.

It's the deliberate greed, the deliberate hypocrisy within the professing church with the intent to deceive others and so gain plaudits for ourselves.

It's that deliberate hypocrisy, that deliberate desire to deceive within the church and so gain plaudits for ourselves.

[18:58] Seeming to do various things, perhaps serving in various ways, but underneath it all, at the root of it, it's all just a sham, an appearance of godliness.

But one day, everything will be exposed and it is God who will do the exposing. And that is the truth and no matter how successfully you might hide it from others, we will in the end be exposed by our judge on the last day.

But we need also to feel the warning for today. This sort of hypocrisy, what was going on there was deeply damaging to the professing church.

It is one of Satan's most effective tactics to see greed and hypocrisy as the driving motivations for what people do in church. How damaging that sort of thing is to Christ's church and the mission of the church.

Because Christ's mission calls for real sacrifice in service of others. That's what his call demands. But this sort of thing is completely the opposite.

[20:13] It's self-service, self-promotion. And that is damaging to the mission of Christ's church. So perhaps you and I need to search our own hearts as we settle into bed tonight.

perhaps there are lies and deceits that we need to repent of. Particular lies and deceits where we're seeking to gain honor, gain position through hypocrisy.

It's a stern word, isn't it? And it's a sobering word. But it's perhaps more specific than that. Note the timing of these events.

Sin could not be allowed to exist in these early days of the church's life. It would have corrupted and paralyzed the progress of the gospel. And God was jealous of the life and health of his church.

Hence, the extreme severity of his dealings here. Right there, Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead.

[21:33] God couldn't allow anything to threaten the work of the gospel in those early days. So it was not just the sin of hypocrisy and deceit, but hypocrisy and deceit at such a time that made it just so serious.

At crucial moments in the church's growth the devil will seek a foothold and the Lord will not tolerate it. He will not tolerate that.

And so we must be aware and alert just to those seedlings of hypocrisy in our own hearts at crucial moments in the church's growth. A few months ago we were looking through the book of Joshua and in chapter 7 you have Achan and he stole some of the devoted things from Jericho and hid them thinking he could deceive everyone even God.

He thought he could get away with it. But at a crucial moment like that in the life of God's people as they were entering the promised land God would not tolerate it.

And similarly here in Acts a crucial moment in the life of God's people. God wouldn't have it. And I think of this moment in the life of our church.

[22 : 58] I think I said this when we were looking at Joshua but in the last year we've gone through a lot of change. We developed into two services in the morning. We've got another location on the west and on the south.

And things are crucial at this juncture in the church's life. And we're now into those new routines but it's still early days. Plenty of opportunity for the corrupt desires of my heart and your heart to bubble to the surface in destructive ways.

Opportunities to deceive in order to claim plaudits. These are crucial days in the life of our church and so we need to be alert and realistic to the devil's schemes.

we must pray and watch our own hearts. And we need to heed the warning of this passage and be rightly fearful.

That is the intended response isn't it? Twice Luke draws our attention to the response of the church to the demise of first Ananias and then his wife.

[24 : 15] Look at verse 5. Ananias dies and great fear came upon all who heard of it.

And again verse 11 and great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard these things. that is the right response to what happened.

God is a fearsome God. He will not tolerate sin. He takes it very seriously. And so we are to rightly fear him, to revere him, to take him seriously and to realize the futility of trying to deceive him, to try to fool him.

He will not be fooled. He will not be deceived. And so let our attitudes as his people be one of right fear.

A fear that sees our own sin and failings clearly. We are not naive about our own hearts. But it is also a fear that drives us to his throne of grace.

[25 : 31] God is a gracious God. All who call upon his name he will not turn away. And so a fearful response is a response that comes to his throne of grace and seeks his mercy.

will you be rightly fearful as we think about ourselves as a church and as individuals in that church? As we look at our own hearts, will you pray that the sort of hypocrisy that was in evidence here in Acts chapter 5 would not be found in our own hearts?

And so will you watch your own hearts? Pray that it will be kept from this. That is my prayer. I know how my own heart grasps for approval to be thought well of.

And it's so easy, isn't it, to seek to deceive others and gain plaudits. And so we are driven to our knees as we fear the Lord rightly.

[26 : 48] Satan is the great deceiver and how we need the Lord's help to stand against his evil ways. This passage is a sobering one.

It's full of realism. It's full of warning. And so we pray and we pray now for our Father's help.

Let's pray. Our heavenly Father, we thank you for your word which cuts to the heart, which reveals the human heart for what it is.

and as we read these words, we're sobered by the reality of the human heart and sobered by the reality of you, the righteous God who judges with complete justice.

God and so help us to God and so help us by your spirit to guard our own hearts against Satan's evil schemes and plans.

[28 : 10] Help us to guard our hearts and help us to rightly fear you that we might live lives that honor and please you, lives that help rather than hinder the progress of the gospel.

And so we ask for your help, so aware of our own failings and sinfulness, but also so aware of the greatness of you, our Savior, and of the grace you extend to all who call upon your name.

Amen. So help us in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.