

AM Acts 4:32-5:11

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 4, and it's on page 1099 of the Church Bible.

! It records events over about a 30-year period after Jesus has been raised from the dead and taken up into heaven.

And early on in the book, well, very shortly after that, the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples, and they preach to the crowd in Jerusalem who are there for the Feast of Pentecost, and about 3,000 believe and are added to their number.

And so there is a community form, the community of believers, which we call the Church. They are the ones who follow the Lord Jesus Christ. And in the book of Acts, it kind of alternates.

Sometimes it speaks about the relations of the disciples to those who are kind of outside the community, how they preach about Jesus and what they do.

[1 : 25] But we also get these pictures of what happens within the Church. And this passage is one of those passages. It gives us a picture of what happens within the Church, what the Church is like.

So we're reading from Acts chapter 4 from verse 32, and we're going to read down to chapter 5, verse 11. 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 lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

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.

[2 : 52] 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 it.

The young men 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.

[4 : 02] 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.

May God bless to us that reading of his word. A message that we read a few minutes ago, that's to Acts chapter 4, verse 32, to chapter 5, verse 11.

Many people today in our society would say something like, that they're not into religion, but that they are spiritual.

[5 : 18] Now, that might be left quite vague. But what often people say they don't want is any organized religion, and perhaps particularly the church.

Many people have turned their back on that. They don't want that. And people will say things like, Well, I don't need a church for a relationship with God. I can just have my own relationship with God.

Western culture tends to be very individualistic. So that means that we highly value the individual's rights and freedoms, freedoms to make their own choices in life.

And so, kind of often what goes with that is that, I just have my own relationship with God. I don't need the church. And maybe some of you here might be able to identify to some degree with that. And yet, at the same time, many people in our society really desire community. And they feel they lack community.

[6 : 29] There may be many reasons for that. Many families are dysfunctional and broken in some way or other. Or are separated by long distances. People move around a lot.

And don't put down roots. And of course, we recently had the pandemic. And the isolation that that caused for many people.

And also, social media. Where people can, in one sense, be connected to others from anywhere in the world. But also feel a lack of connection with people.

A personal connection. And feel isolated. And many people find that the extreme individualism of our society has a bleak side to it.

There's loneliness. There's isolation. There's a rootlessness. And just a loss of identity that comes with that. And many people want to be part of something bigger than themselves.

[7 : 33] They want to be valued. They want to be loved. They want a sense of belonging. Now, according to the Bible, God made us as social beings.

He made us for relationship with other beings. Other human beings. I think that where this comes out most strongly is right at the beginning of Genesis.

In Genesis chapter 2, God created Adam. And God says that God creates Adam and he's got lots of animals, lots of other creatures around him.

But God says it's not good for the man to be alone. And we have to remember that's in the context of a perfect creation. This is before there's any sin in the world.

Before there's anything that's gone wrong. It's in God's good and perfect creation. And Adam, as someone who has not yet sinned, has a perfect relationship with God, his maker.

[8 : 31] And yet, God recognizes, God sees, God knows that it's not good for him to be alone. And so he makes a woman, his wife Eve, to be with him, for companionship with him.

And of course, from that there comes the institution of marriage and also just society. Human community comes from that. Because God has made us.

God has designed us for that. Now, God's plan, God rules over world history.

God has a plan for world history. And it has a goal, which is in the future when Jesus Christ will return to this world. And God will restore all things.

It speaks of that in chapter 3, verse 21. The time when God will restore all things to that original harmony and goodness that he made. And part of that is God restoring human community.

[9 : 34] So God's people, when Jesus Christ returns, will be the perfect human society. But of course, we're not there yet. But there's a kind of a foretaste of that, an advance notice of that in the church, the people of God.

The people of Jesus Christ. So, the church in the age to come will be human society as God intended it to be.

A perfect human society. In this world, in this present age, the church hasn't got there yet. Yet, we're still imperfect. We're still flawed.

We're works in progress. And yet, it's meant to be a foretaste of that human society that God intended at the beginning. And a central theme of the book of Acts is the church.

The community of God's people. And we have these sort of pictures, these visions, pictures of the early church.

[10 : 39] Of what it looked like. And for the most part, it's a healthy, vibrant church. It's kind of almost like a model church. It sets a pattern.

It shows a picture of what the church should be. And one of the questions, as we read through Acts, that we should ask for ourselves is, how do we measure up as a church?

How do we measure up to this picture of the church portrayed for us in Acts? Or maybe you're new to the church. You're kind of on the edge of it.

You're kind of just looking. You're just investigating. Well, Jesus Christ calls you, first of all, into relationship with himself and with God through him. But also into community.

The community of his people. Which is his church. And this is what, in the book of Acts, this is what it's meant to look like. So, with those things in mind, let's look at the passage.

[11 : 37] And there's two headings. First of all, a sharing community. And then second, a holy community. First of all, then, a sharing community.

And that's in chapter 4, verse 32 to 37. The first thing we see is that they have a shared faith. It says, now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul.

Or that could be translated one heart and mind. And notice they're all described as those who believed. The believers. And that's those who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel.

That is what they're wanting. That's what they share. They share this faith. That is the most fundamental thing. The most foundational thing that they share. That is, that's what their whole fellowship is built on.

And, you know, we mentioned that people today long for community. Many people do. But a community has to be based on something, around something.

[12 : 46] It can't be just, you just come together with nothing in common. And the great thing that this community had in common is that they were believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. And in the gospel, the good news of salvation that comes through him.

And in the next verse, it speaks about the apostles with great power giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And that resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to that gospel. That this Jesus whom we believe in is the Jesus who died, who was crucified, but who was raised to life again. So there's this shared faith in Jesus Christ.

And then also we see that they shared their possessions. Verse 32, the second part of it says, No one said that any of the things that belonged to them, to him, was his own.

But they had everything in common. A bit later, verse 34, Sometimes this is being compared with communism.

[14 : 05] But there are some rather big, significant differences in communist societies that we saw in the 20th century.

There was coercion. People had no choice. It was just, you had to put your labor, your income into the common pot.

Sharing was forced, such as it was. But in the church, it was voluntary. People gave because they wanted to give. They were moved to give.

Also in communist societies in the 20th century, the leaders often were very rich. I spent a few months in Romania just after the fall of communism there.

And it sort of came to light that while the people were living in poverty, basically, the leader, Ceaușescu, was living in just opulent, lavish luxury.

[15 : 03] And there's absolutely no hint of that here. The apostles are not feathering their own nest. But the ideal of communism, which it failed to deliver, was realized in this early church.

People shared voluntarily and freely. And so we read that there were no needy persons among them. There was not a needy person among them in verse 34.

The Greek word for needy can also be translated as poor. And it's the same word that's used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and of the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 15.

Deuteronomy, chapter 15, talks about redistribution of wealth in ancient Israel through land being returned to those who originally owned it.

And you can look at that chapter later on if you like. But there's just a couple of verses from that passage that I think stand out, which relate to this. In Deuteronomy 15, verse 4, it says that there should be no poor among you.

[16 : 15] That was the ideal for the Old Testament Israelites in the land of promise that God had given them. And yet a bit later, just a few verses later in verse 11 of that chapter, it says there will always be poor people in the land.

So you've got the kind of the ideal, but also the realism there. The ideal that there should be no poor people, but the realism that, well, there always will be poor people in the land.

But here in this early church, this early community of believers in Christ, the ideal is fulfilled because of the sharing, because people sold their property, their possessions, to meet the needs of the poor among them.

And Luke, the writer of this, provides an example in the case of Barnabas, or Joseph, who is also called Barnabas. Now, if you read on in Acts, Barnabas becomes a fairly major character in the book.

And he's introduced here. That's one of part of Luke's style. He often introduces major characters just by a brief reference. And then they come in later on. But Barnabas exemplified this open-handed generosity and sharing.

[17 : 33] What was their secret? We've seen that they, in this community, they fulfilled what was the ideal for Old Testament Israel, and yet which in Old Testament Israel, they never really managed to reach that, to attain that.

Well, I think the answer is in verse 33, where it's at the end of that verse, it says, Great grace was upon them all.

Another translation puts it like this. God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all. And I think that is the key, that is the clue to their success.

It is the grace of God. And there are two aspects to that grace. There's God's grace to us, and second, God's grace in us.

First of all, there's God's grace to us. The believer has received abundant grace from God in Jesus Christ. We have been saved.

[18 : 35] Our sins have been forgiven. We have peace with God. We have eternal life through Jesus Christ. And these blessings, these benefits, they come to us at immense cost.

And yet, it's a cost that we don't have to pay. But God himself pays it. God paid it by the giving up of his one and only Son. What was most precious to him, he gave up.

And Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God, God the Son, paid it by laying down his life for us. We in no way earn or deserve that salvation.

It comes to us. We receive it as a free gift, graciously given from God. The Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 8 verse 9 says that you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor. So that you through his poverty might become rich. Jesus Christ gave up the riches and glory of heaven and became poor.

[19 : 50] And lived among us a life of suffering and poverty and hardship. And then ultimately gave his life for us on a cross. In the light of that, how can we not be open-handed and generous?

So there's God's grace to us, but there's also God's grace in us. God's grace not only forgives us, it also transforms us.

Now, when it comes to money and possessions, these things are not bad. They're gifts from God. They're good gifts from God. And yet they come with a danger because it's very easy for us to worship them.

To make them the most important things in our life. That what we live for is just to get more money, to get more possessions, more stuff. And they become all important to us.

And they control our lives. Or maybe it's just worry about them. And that just eats you up. It controls the whole of life. But God's grace sets us free from that worship of money.

[21 : 02] The Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of believers. Often that's slow and gradual. It doesn't happen all at once. We're all works in progress if we are God's people.

But God's grace transforms people who are stingy and possessive and greedy into being generous, open-handed people.

One great example of that in the Gospels is Zacchaeus. Who was a greedy, rich tax collector. And yet encountered Jesus and he was made generous and open-handed.

Well, just to apply this to ourselves. The precise details of this may not be exactly the same today. But the principle of being sharing. Of being open-handed. Of seeking. Of working towards that ideal of there being no poor and needy persons among you.

[21 : 58] Because God himself cares for the poor and needy. And we each of us need to ask ourselves, is God's grace at work in us?

Have we received his amazing, indescribable gift? The gift of his grace in Jesus Christ. And are we in turn generous and gracious and open-handed?

Paul writes in Galatians 6.10 that as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people. Especially to those who belong to the household of faith.

Well then we come to the second section. Where we see a holy community. Now so far in Acts, we have had quite a very positive picture of a dynamic spiritual community.

There are healings, miracles. They overcome opposition with great courage. There's growth as people are added to the church. And they are sharing and generous. And living under the blessing of God.

[23 : 07] And then we come to chapter 5. And there's this disaster of sin and judgment. And it's kind of like a shock. It's almost like a slap in the face. As we read through the book of Acts.

And we might wonder, why is this even included in Acts? Why did Luke include this story? Well I think he included it, well, first of all because it happened.

But also because he wants to record a balanced picture of this community. It's not a perfect community. We should not be surprised when things go wrong in the church.

Sometimes badly wrong. Because the church consists of sinners. Of course we're all sinners. And also sometimes we don't know the eternal destiny of Ananias and Sapphira.

Whether they were believers who had been succumbed to this temptation. Or whether they were just hypocrites all along. And were not, never believers. We don't know the answers to that. But it tells us that the church, it just tells us not to be surprised when things go wrong.

[24 : 17] But also Luke, I think, wants us to know that God is holy and pure. And God calls his church, his people, to be holy and pure.

What was Ananias and Sapphira's sin? Well, in verse 1 we read that a man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property.

And with his wife's knowledge she 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.

Now keeping back some of the money was not wrong in and of itself.

[25 : 26] Peter makes that clear in verse 4 that the land belonged to you. And when you sold it, the money belonged to you. It was at your disposal to do what you wanted with it.

Giving was voluntary. But what Ananias and Sapphira's sin was, was that they were saying that they were giving all the money from the land they had sold, when in actual fact they were keeping some of it back for themselves.

And the motive for that was hypocrisy. Basically, they wanted to appear more generous than they really were. They wanted the respect and honour from others.

Maybe they saw that, you know, that Barnabas was, you know, highly esteemed for his generosity. And they thought, oh, that's, yeah, we want to be like that. We want to have that esteem, that recognition, that honour from other people.

But they didn't want to give all the money away. And that is a very common motivation, a common temptation.

[26 : 29] We want a good reputation. We want the approval, the applause, the esteem of other people. We want the honour, the good name that goes with that.

But that is dangerous because it can lead us, it can tempt us into lying, into hypocrisy and deceit to get these. To try and put an image of ourselves before others that is actually better than we really are.

That was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira. Notice Peter says, you have lied to the Holy Spirit, in verse 3.

And in verse 4, you have lied not just to men, but to God. That's just, as a slight aside, we see from that that Peter regards the Holy Spirit as being a personal being.

You can't lie to a thing or to a force. The Holy Spirit is a person. And lying to the Holy Spirit is the same as lying to God.

[27 : 33] And that indicates that the Holy Spirit is divine, is a divine person. Along with the Father and with the Son. What was the consequence of their sin?

Well, we see from this, as we see elsewhere in the Bible, that God sees and knows all things. We cannot hide anything from God.

And God reveals it to Peter. And the outcome of this is the judgment of God on Ananias and his immediate death.

And later, when his wife Sapphira comes in, she's given opportunity to confess. But she continues the lie. She aspires to test the spirit of the Lord. Or to see what she could get away with.

And on her too, the judgment is immediate death. Not only that, one of the kind of really poignant things of this passage is that the kind of outcome, the judgment on Ananias and Sapphira is disgrace.

[28 : 36] You see, Ananias and Sapphira had wanted a good reputation. They had wanted the esteem and approval of others. They wanted people to think that they were generous, good people.

And they were prepared to lie. To present a false image of themselves to other people. To get that. They wanted that good name. They wanted that honor and respect and esteem.

But the outcome of this is utter shame and disgrace. Because here we are, 2,000 years later. What do we know Ananias and Sapphira for?

We know them not for generosity, but for hypocrisy. What was the effect of their sin on the church and on others?

In verse 11 we read that great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. This is actually the first use of the word church in the book of Acts.

[29 : 39] And I think church is a bit of a difficult word in the English language. Church. Because many people, when you say the word church, they think, first of all, of buildings. And then second, they might think of an institution or institutions that we call the church.

And only third, the people, the community of people that make up a church. And it's actually the other way around. It's completely the reverse of that.

It's the community of God's people that is important. That's why William Tyndale, when he translated the New Testament 500 years ago this year, he avoided the word church and used the word congregation.

But that maybe makes us think of just one particular group in one place. So that's maybe also difficult. So we'll stick with the word church. But just be aware that it doesn't mean a building.

Not even really an institution. It's the community of people. And we see here that God is present with his people through the Holy Spirit.

[30 : 48] And that is a source of great comfort and joy and power to the church, to God's people. But also God is holy and pure and true and righteous.

And he demands that we be too. And Ananias and Sapphira serve as a warning to us that God is here among us. God is with us.

And he sees through our lies, through our hypocrisy, through our pretense. The judgment today may not be as immediate as that on Ananias and Sapphira.

But we will have to give an account to God one day for the lies, the pretense, the hypocrisy that we exhibit in our lives.

And so the exhortation from this passage is to live in the light of God's holy presence. Paul in Galatians 6 says that God cannot be mocked.

[31 : 55] We can't. Ananias and Sapphira lied to God, but God wasn't taken in by that. God knows. God sees. God is present. He is holy.

And he demands that we be holy. Let's pray. Lord our God, as we read this, we see ourselves.

It's a mirror for us and we see ourselves in it. We see our own tendency to pretense, to hypocrisy, even to deceit.

And we pray that you would forgive us for that. And that you would help us to live in the light of your presence. Your presence among us as a church.

Your presence with us as individuals in our day-to-day lives. That you see and you know all things. That you are holy. And that you demand that we be holy.

[32 : 51] And we pray that we would desire that. That we would desire purity in our own lives.

That's to be pure, to be holy, to be honest, to be people of integrity.

To be people whose lives bring honour and glory to you. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.