

God's Presence and Concern for His People

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Date: 13 October 2019

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- [0 : 0 0] I thought I'd start this morning with a couple of reflections from kids about church. And so Alan, aged 10, when asked what his favorite part of church was, said, The end.
- Or when Joel, aged 4, started giggling and talking in church, his sister Angie, aged 6, said, You're not supposed to talk out loud in church or you'll get in trouble.
- See those two men standing at the back? They're the hushers. Well, I wonder what your view of church actually is. When you hear the word church, what do you think of? What comes to mind?
- Do you think of it as a place that you have to be quiet in or you'll get in trouble? Or is it a place that you have to endure until the end finally comes?
- Or perhaps it's just another club you attend, like a sports club that you are part of and go to just when it suits you, when it fits in?
- [1 : 0 3] Or do you see the church as something much, much more? Well, today we come to another summary of the early church. And Luke gives us, or he's actually given us a summary way back in chapter 2.
- And lots of the same things he mentions today, he mentioned back in chapter 2. In fact, I've actually, on the back of your outlines, put a table to compare the summaries.
- And you'll notice that there is a lot of overlap. Luke mentions lots of the same things again. Only today's summary seems to be split in two, with a description of some early church members, like Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira.
- Luke's summary, with his description of these three members, gives us a picture of the early church, which I think is helpful for us today in our church at HTD.
- And Luke begins, though, by describing this early church as one with great grace. So at point 1 in your outlines, and chapter 4, verse 32 in your Bibles. It says, All the believers were one in heart and mind.
- [2 : 1 3] No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything, or had everything in common. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.
- And Luke, the original language he wrote in, he literally wrote, And great grace was upon them all. Here the believers were one in heart and mind.
- That is, they regarded themselves as one. And so even though they owned certain possessions, they considered them as belonging to everyone. In other words, they willingly shared their stuff.
- What's more, it seems God's presence was in the church. For he is dispensing great power to his apostles, and literally great grace upon all his people.
- And now Luke will unpack the great power of the apostles in the second half of the summary, when he looks at the signs and wonders that the apostles were doing. But it's worth noting, though, that this great grace comes with their testifying about Jesus.

[3 : 22] They're mentioned together. And I suspect it's because it's as we hear afresh about Jesus, that God's spirit gives us grace.

That is, he moves in our hearts and moves us to be gracious or generous to others. It's just exactly what was happening. Just see verse 34. That's pretty extraordinary, isn't it?

Now, their extra fields and houses were like their savings accounts and investment properties. And the needy here are not necessarily the poor, but anyone who was in need.

If someone lost their job and needed money for food and the like, and then that qualified them at that moment. Whatever it was, from time to time, others cashed in their savings accounts or sold their assets to give to the needy in the church.

It's an incredible commitment to one another, isn't it? And if it unsettles us a bit, like it did me when I first read it, then I think that's a good thing.

[4 : 46] 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 we then become needy ourselves.

But it seems that God gives grace to enable us to be gracious to others. It'll look different for different people, of course. But it suggests that this is what he wants for his church, for us, to give to one another when they are in need.

And I know this happens here at HGD. I don't think anyone's sold fields or houses, but I do know some who have given substantial requests. We use some of that money for a benevolence fund to help people in need amongst us.

I know of others who've given large amounts of money to people in need, from \$1,000 gifts to, in a few cases, \$10,000 gifts. I know of others who've provided food and meals and clothes to those families who needed it.

And in one case, a car. Now, of course, it's not about the amount of money. It's about the attitude. All I'm saying is it's happening here amongst us, which is terrific.

[6 : 05] Of course, if people don't tell us they are in need, then we cannot help them. Often that's the hard part, isn't it? We don't like to confess that we need help. And often asking for help and even receiving help can feel embarrassing, can't it?

But for those who've received, and I've been on the receiving end in the past, it also makes you feel greatly encouraged, doesn't it? That people care that much. Which is why Joseph is renamed Barnabas, son of encouragement.

Do you see verse 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 now to give us a positive example of giving to those in need. Barnabas was a Jew, that's a Levite, from Cyprus we're told, who probably came to Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, because there was a big Jewish festival, if you remember, and was converted then.

And he has such an encouragement that the apostles have to give him a new name. We've got to call you Barnabas, son of encouragement, because that's what you are. Can you imagine that?

[7 : 22] Being such a genuine and generous, encouraging Christian, that the church says, look, we've got to give you a new name. We've got to call you Barnabas or Barnabelle. I think that's daughter of encouragement, I'm not sure.

But you get the point. Here is a positive example of giving to those in need. But we move from the positive to the negative now. Now, it's like in our first reading, just as we have the ideal life in the garden, and Gillian very helpfully read the last bit of chapter 2, and he's spoilt by Satan's temptation and the sin of a married couple, Adam and Eve.

So also the ideal life in the church is again spoilt by Satan's temptation and the sin of another married couple, Ananias and Sapphira. But it rightly leads to great fear.

So at point 2 now in your outlines and chapter 5, verse 1 in your Bibles, it says, 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 the rest he brought and put 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?

[8 : 43] Didn't it belong to you before it was sold, and after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal to do what you like with? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings, but to God.

And notice here in verse 4, that this practice of selling land and giving them money was not compulsory. It was voluntary. In verse 4, Peter says, The land was theirs.

They didn't have to sell it. They could do what they liked with it. And Peter says, The money was at their disposal. They didn't have to give any of it, or they could give part of it. It was all up to them.

But it seems that this couple wanted to have a compliment like Barnabas. They wanted praise. And so as verse 3 says, Instead of being one of heart, they allowed Satan to fill their hearts, presumably with envy and certainly with deceit.

Because we're told twice in verse 3 and 4 that Ananias lied. He deceived. And so their sin here was not a lack of generosity, they still gave.

[9 : 51] I've often heard people, churches preach on this, and they kind of bash the congregation over their head and say, Look what happens if you're not generous. Ananias is fire. They were generous. That's not the issue. The issue is that they deceived.

And I wonder if we are sometimes tempted to deceive in order to be praised, or perhaps save face. You know, when someone's been unwell, perhaps not in money, but in terms of caring, someone's been unwell, and you say, Oh, I was going to ring you, when really, you hadn't even thought of it.

Or perhaps in terms of what we believe, you might say, Oh, yeah, I believe the Bible is God's word. But then when you're out with non-Christian family or friends, you ignore parts of it and follow their word.

Now, hopefully we don't do that. But either way, all such deceit is ultimately against God. Did you notice? Verse 3, it says, Ananias lied to the spirit.

Or verse 4, it says, he lied not just to human beings, but to God. Why? Well, again, because it seems God is present in his church, not just to give grace, but also to expose the secrets of sin and judge.

[11 : 07] Do you see 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.

Peter, in the previous verses, asked Ananias four questions, but throughout it all, Ananias remained silent, didn't he? He didn't interject with confession.

He didn't fall down in repentance and say sorry. He stayed silent, and so now he falls down dead. But this is not an act of Peter.

It's an act of God. It's a supernatural act of God. And it tells us that God is present amongst his people. It happens again, verse 7, about three hours later, in fact, 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 repent. But no, she sticks with the story and says, yes, this is the price.

[12 : 11] So 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. At that moment, she fell down at his feet and died.

Then the young man 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.

Sapphira is given a chance to repent, but sticks with her story, doesn't she? She tests the spirit. That is, she provokes God's spirit to act, and he does in judgment.

And so she falls at Peter's feet, the very place they put the money. And great fear seizes the church, we're told.

This is the first time Luke uses the word church in all his writings, actually. What a time to use it. You know, welcome to church, everyone. It kind of reminds me of another kid's reflection, Alex, age seven, who was staring at a plaque in the foyer before a church service.

[13 : 16] One day, the plaque had the names of soldiers who had fought for their country on it. 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.

And then Alex asked in a rather shaky voice, which service? The nine or 10 a.m.? But here Ananias and Sapphira actually died in the service, so to speak, in the church.

And again, this is an act of God that 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, a pastor I know of in New South Wales, I've got a family member who goes to this church, earlier this year, covered up an affair between one of his staff members and a youth group girl.

And when people in the church asked this senior pastor to do something about it, to stand this guy down who had this affair, he covered it up and he bullied people who went against him.

[14 : 26] The church was divided and it caused havoc and people were leaving, disillusioned. But just when he was about to fight with the professional standards unit he was coming in to investigate, the very day before he was to meet with them, he literally fell down dead.

Now, the official cause was a heart attack as far as I know, but who knows the real cause. Now, I don't know if the two were particularly related, but it was very coincidental. Either way, that kind of thing is not common today, is it?

But it is here in Acts. The supernatural is everywhere, isn't it? Why? Well, because this was the beginning of the new church here in Acts. 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, gathering, this new gathering was no ordinary one.

It was God's gathering. Even if the Jewish authorities denied it, and they did, these supernatural events validated it.

Of course, after 2,000 years, the apostles are no longer with us, and people know the church is God's gathering, or at least claims to be. I worry about some churches, but we don't have much of the supernatural now because it's no longer the beginning of the church.

[15 : 49] God can still do miracles, of course, but we don't have as much of it. But the purpose of this judgment back then seems to be to cause great fear. Did you notice that? We're told it twice, verse 5 and verse 11.

You see, verse 11, great fear seized the whole church. Now, here we need to understand that this great fear, although it is great, it's not sheer terror such that they run away and leave the church.

These people stayed. 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 because he's present with them.

And I wonder if this is what we're concerned to see here at H2D. And not just great grace from God, which moves us to generously care for one another, particularly those in need, but also great fear of God that moves us to be holy and set apart for him.

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

[17 : 11] I was asking my Bible study group last week when the last time was that they prayed for our church's holiness, but as soon as I asked the question, it struck me that I can't remember the last time I prayed for it, actually.

We forget these things. They're kind of not really fashionable to talk about. Fearing God, like reverently, praying for holiness. But God is concerned that his church does those things, that we might fear him rightly and joyfully seek to be holy.

Well, Luke returns to his summary now and starts to unpack that great power he mentioned back in chapter 4, verse 33. So we're now at point 3 and he picks it up in chapter 5, verse 12.

So towards the bottom of your Bibles there. 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.

Solomon's colonnade was a huge public area for this church to meet. There was a few thousand of them. Remember the temple in Jerusalem in that day was massive.

[18 : 25] So on the next slide, here is a scaled model of the temple with the city of Jerusalem in the background and you can see that the temple dominates, doesn't it? It's massive. And Solomon's colonnade is the kind of front section along the front there.

It was a covered section where the early church met. The beautiful gate is probably the gates into the kind of temple area proper which is where Peter and John healed the lame man a couple of weeks ago in chapter 3.

But this is where the church met in Solomon's colonnade. This is an artist's impression just to give you an idea of the sizes. I don't actually think that's Solomon's colonnade. I think it's the one on the right hand side that you can just see out of the screen but it's that kind of area.

It's a big area, isn't it? This is where the church met in this public place. This is where the apostles would have continued to testify about the risen Jesus with great power.

This word power here in Luke is always used in the book of Acts to refer to something miraculous. And so as they preached they also performed miracles amongst the church presumably with the public looking on.

[19 : 37] But the public did not dare verse 13 did not dare join them under the colonnade. It seems that while these supernatural miracles have validated this new group as God's gathering caused the public to hold the church in high regard it also caused the public to keep their distance.

And yet we're told in verse 14 nevertheless more and more men and women that is more than ever men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

And as a result of the miracles people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on 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.

You see while the miracles kept people at a distance such that they preferred to bring their sick to the streets instead we're told in verse 14 people still became Christians.

So how does that work? If they're keeping their distance how are they still becoming Christians? Well remember the apostles what were they doing with great power? Well they were testifying to the resurrection of Jesus.

[20 : 57] They were proclaiming the gospel. And so it seems that as they were continuing to preach about Jesus not just in the temple but wherever they went they would go out into the streets to heal these people who'd been brought in.

They would at the same time preach the gospel. How Jesus died to pay for our sins and rise again as Lord so that everyone who believes in him might be saved from judgment and given the guarantee of eternal life.

And so verse 14 as they did that as they preached more and more more than ever more than the 3,000 we saw a few weeks ago more than the 5,000 we saw a couple weeks ago more than ever people believed in the Lord Jesus and then joined the church in the colonnade.

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

And so we do not need to worry about having no apostles today who can do signs and wonders because it's the preaching of the risen Jesus that saves our friends and family.

[22 : 07] And that's what we're to continue to do as a church to proclaim Christ. Whereas the great power of the apostles with their signs and wonders well the apostles are no longer with us.

They were kind of one-off historical things that testified to the church and taught us things about God. How like God was present with his people. You see Luke's purpose here is not just to show us how sin threatens the church.

You know some people talk about how last week we saw persecution that's the external threat to the church. This week is the internal threat of deception and it's true deception is dangerous as one commentator put it falsehood ruins fellowship but Luke interrupts his summary to primarily show us that God's presence is in his church.

That's what we're seeing time and time again. That's the theme that runs throughout. We see God's presence by the way he dispenses great grace to his people like Barnabas to be generous to others.

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

[23 : 21] And then he shows his presence by the way he judges supernaturally and how great fear of God grips the church. He shows his presence as he gives great power to his apostles to perform signs and wonders and then by adding even more men and women to the church as they preach about his son.

And so I take it Luke's purpose here is to show that this church is not just another social group or sports club. rather it is nothing less than the dwelling place of God.

And I wonder do we have such a high view of church and not the building that's not the church it's us the people this gathering together. Do we have such a high view?

You see God is with us by his spirit as individuals true working in our conscience but he's even more so with us as we gather together as church. For this is God's goal for us that's what he's on about.

Gathering people together in Christ as church. In fact did you realise that's where we're heading for in heaven? God dwelling with his people and us with him together that's church.

[24 : 36] This is what God is on about in this world. This is where we are headed. Do you have such a high view of church? It matters how we treat one another.

Why we ought to remember God's grace so that we might be moved to show grace to others in need. It's why it matters how we live amongst one another. How we ought to rightly fear God that we might joyfully live holy lives before him.

For this is no Mickey Mouse kind of gathering. This is the church of the living God which he bought by the blood of his son and which he dwells in by his spirit.

Indeed God's presence in his church makes this gathering greater than any other gathering you'll be part of during the week. No matter what our world says. A gathering worth continuing to make every effort to keep coming to.

And so thank you for making that effort. I know for some of you it's really hard to get to church Sunday by Sunday. Well someone from the early morning service told me about a four year old relative of theirs whose father is also a pastor or minister.

[25 : 53] And during church one day as his father was preaching this kid called out in a loud voice when is dad gonna shut up? Wasn't one of my kids.

So let me shut up and finish with this. I asked at the start how do we view church? Do you view it as just another social group or sports club?

Or do you see it as it really is? The very dwelling place of the living God. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father we do thank you for this reminder this morning of the church.

The gathering of your people in which you dwell by your spirit. And so therefore it matters how we treat one another and how we live amongst one another.

And please move us by your generosity to us in Christ to in turn be generous to those in need amongst us. And help us we pray knowing whose presence we are in to rightly fear you and seek to live holy lives before you.

[27 : 02] We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.