

Acts 4:32-5:42

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[0 : 00] If you've got a Bible, turn to Acts chapter 4. And it would really help you to have a Bible in front of you. And so do run and grab one from the door. Or look at it on your phone, if you're able to not be distracted.

And the end of Acts chapter 4, I'm going to go right the way through from the end of Acts 4 to the whole of chapter 5. A little while ago, I came across a website that gave kids funny answers to school tests or exams.

There was one geography test that said, can you name six animals which live specifically in the Arctic? One kid answered, two polar bears and four seals.

There was a history exam that ended, what ended in 1896? And one wise guy responded, 1895.

Another history question, where was the American Declaration of Independence?

And it's signed. One kid answered at the bottom. And so I'm not sure what this subject was. But here's the question, it went something like this.

[1 : 13] Some atoms share electrons and become more stable. Can you describe a situation where people can share something and everyone benefits? And the answer came back, communism.

Communism is an ideology. Some of you here will have experienced it. Some of you might even be drawn to it. Others of you detest it. And interestingly, sometimes people go to Acts 4 and it's been described as a kind of Christian communism.

People are sharing their possessions with one another. People are making sure all the needy are looked after. And I can understand why people might think that about Acts chapter 4. But personally, I think there's some big problems with that.

Luke's explanation of what's going on is that the church are under the influence of a great power and great grace. And it starts, doesn't it, with that wonderful expression in chapter 4 and verse 32. Where it says, now the full number of those who believed were one heart and soul. And no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own.

[2 : 26] But they had everything in common. It's a wonderful description. In that church, there was such unity amongst the Christians in those churches. That they could possess one mind and one heart.

A common heart and a common mind. Their desires and their thoughts in the church were this remarkable unity. And their unity, we're told, is fed and shaped by the teaching of the apostles. And that's the first of two things that is described as great in verse 33. Now this sermon is really clear in my mind. But there's about three different structures going on.

So you can take your pick. Hopefully it'll be clear in your mind by the end too. If it's not, you can complain. Two things Luke describes. Look at verse 3. Two things that are great.

He says that with great power, the apostles were giving testimony to the Lord Jesus. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And so point one really is, there's a church here that's filled with great grace and great power.

[3 : 32] The apostles are teaching that the new believers, and they're teaching them and they're continuing to preach this message to anyone else in the world who will listen.

And the focus of the New Testament church was the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. That was where the early church found their great power.

But there's a second thing, isn't there? There's great power. But Luke describes in that verse, there's great grace was upon them all. Great undeserved kindness was upon them all. Great grace accompanying great power.

And that grace, that grace, that great undeserved generosity meant that there was no needy person among them. God's grace provoked them into a radical generosity.

Unlike communism, the early church still believed in private ownership. That's clear from chapter 5 and verse 4. But nevertheless, they adopted a really sacrificial attitude. Verse 32, no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

[4 : 40] Verse 34, there was not a needy person among them. For as many 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. That echoes what we've seen already in chapter 2 of Acts.

And it really is an incredible commitment to each other that is being described here. And if that unsettles you a little bit, let me tell you, I think that's a good thing.

Here's what one writer said about these verses. He said, Here's a surprise.

That was written 550 years ago by a man called John Calvin. And if that was true then, how much more is that true today? This radical generosity is counter-cultural.

[6 : 03] These early Christians saw their possessions to be genuinely at the disposal of others, according to their needs. So much so that they were willing to sell what was theirs in order to provide for others.

Now, when was the last time any of us did that? It seems that most of us, who are trusting the Lord Jesus Christ, are willing to be generous with our liquid assets.

That's the money in our bank or what's in our wallet. But I suspect that it rarely occurs to us to liquidate some of the things that we own in order to be generous to others in need.

And I suspect we should be very provoked and challenged by what we read. Luke follows this up by pointing to the example of one particular man, a man named Barnabas, that was his nickname.

One writer I read called Barnabas the poster boy of a Jewish convert. He may have been one of the people that was converted on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. And here he is just a short little while selling a field he owned and bringing the money to the feet of the apostles.

[7 : 17] And I think the symbolism there is he's bringing it to the church and saying, use this where the needs are greatest. And his action becomes a kind of benchmark to which other believers will aspire.

People like a married couple called Ananias and Sapphira. Now just before we move into chapter 5, I want us to pause and to take a mental picture of this church.

The church that Luke describes here is a church living under a powerful influence. There is powerful preaching and there is divine favour.

Luke calls it great power and great grace. And who wouldn't want to be part of a church like this? A church where people come together and they hear God's word powerfully preached and a church where people care for one another deeply and people are generous towards one another and dependent on God's word.

It's a church full of grace and full of power. Who would not want to join a church like that? But then things come and stuck. And it seems to me there's a bit of a parallel here.

[8 : 30] You've got a parallel of the idyllic situation at the start of the Bible. The idyllic experience of Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden of Eden.

And it's spoiled by the sin of a married couple. And so you come to Acts chapter 5 and the idyllic experience of the early church is spoiled by the sin of a married couple.

And so as we move from chapter 5, we move from a church that is filled with grace and power to a church that's filled with fear. And in place of those united hearts, do you remember that?

We see divided hearts. We find that hearts have been corrupted. So look at chapter 5 verse 3. Do you remember? 4.32, one heart. 5 verse 3, Peter says, Ananias, why has the devil, Satan, filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?

If you've been here through the series in Acts, we are learning that there are threats to the Christian church. And the threats do not just come from outside, from persecution and pressure, but they come from inside, from the sin of church members.

[9 : 48] And as the one-heartedness of chapter 4 is undermined by the corruption of hearts in chapter 5, so too is the one-mindedness undermined. And the sin of Ananias and Sapphira shatters a really wonderful unity.

Their sin is not primarily greed. Okay? It's deceit. It's hypocrisy. And it seems to me that Ananias and Sapphira, they wanted the reputation of the poster boy Barnabas.

And they saw Barnabas and his generosity and how people were so thankful for what he'd done and who he was, and they wanted his reputation without the sacrifice. They were consumed by envy.

They wanted to be thought of as more generous than they actually were. The issue wasn't that they wanted to keep some money for themselves. No, that was fine. That's not the issue.

But the issue is that they pretended that they were giving it all. Peter says there in verse 4, while it remained unsold, didn't it remain your own? And after it was sold, wasn't it at your disposal?

[10:57] Why is it that you've contrived this deed in your heart? You've not lied to man, but to God. They wanted to be seen, to be like Barnabas. But in the end, they proved to be very, very different.

And this really is, isn't it, a provocative challenge to us and our money, and to me and my money. Because the sin of Ananias and Sapphira leaves us asking a pretty uncomfortable question of ourselves. Is it possible that we would like the kudos that comes with generosity without the inconvenience of it?

Do we want to be seen to be generous without really making any sacrifices? And that is very close to home, isn't it?

And I wonder if we, if I, am ever guilty of a similar hypocrisy. Well, we know what happens next. In the previous paragraph, we saw the power of the apostles influencing the church.

[12:08] And here we see the church captured by the power of God. And the judgment that Ananias and Sapphira fell under is swift and complete and utterly unforgettable.

Did you notice, at the start of the story, they brought their money to lay at the feet of the apostles? That's verse 2. They bring their money and they lay it at the feet of the apostles, but in chapter 10, but in verse 10, they are stone cold dead at the feet of the apostles.

And again, it reminds us of another story, doesn't it, in the Old Testament, the story of Achan, which is told in Joshua chapter 7. Because Achan too, he sinned, didn't he?

And he sinned against the people of God, the community to which he belonged, and he tried to hide it and he was struck down dead. And it seems significant that the founding moments of the Old Testament community of God's people, you have the sin of Achan, and then the founding moment of the New Testament community of God's people, you have Ananias and Sapphira.

And it's as if God is acting to show that sin, our rebellion, and our deceit has no place in his church. God acts devastatingly and nothing if not memorably.

[13:33] There can be no mistake that here, this act is the power of God rather than the power of the apostles. Some people see this chapter as a kind of pattern for church discipline.

I think that misreads it. It's not the church leaders exercising discipline, it is God exercising discipline. Peter makes it really clear, doesn't he?

He says, you two, you've sinned against God. Notice the way he speaks about the Holy Spirit and God interchangeably. Where do you see that God, where do you see that the Holy Spirit is God? Verse three says, you've lied to the Holy Spirit.

Verse four says, you've lied to God. Verse nine says, you've conspired to test the Lord. And just as God is the one who has been sinned against, so he is the one that responds.

It's not the church leaders that decide that Ananias and Sapphira should die. It's not the church leaders or members who carry out this discipline. God does. And that's why the people respond by fearing God.

[14:35] And God let's be clear about that. This wasn't a kind of posture that people adopted after they carefully reviewed the evidence and they came to a considered point of view.

No, they see Ananias and Sapphira drop dead and they are gripped with fear. Great fear. They're scared. They recognize who God is in all his terrifying holiness and power and they're afraid.

Chapter 4 tells us the church knew great power and great grace. But here you see something else that the church experiences that Luke calls great.

Verse 5. When Ananias heard these words he fell down and breathed his last and great fear came upon all who heard it. Verse 11. Great fear came upon the whole church and all who heard of these things.

This is the first time that the word church appears in Luke's writings. He wrote a gospel and he wrote Acts and this is the first time the word church appears in his writing.

[15:44] Luke says, this is church everyone. This is the place where sin is taken very, very seriously. This is more than just a service with some singing.

More than warm hearted fellowship and a cup of tea. Life and death is at stake here. He is saying that the church is a place where God is.

And God sees even the secrets of your heart and mine. And the God who sees everything is the God who is determined not to let us stay as we are. But who will break us and remake us until we're like his son.

And if that doesn't terrify us we're not listening. Welcome to church. Welcome to church.

Luke says. What happened at your church last Sunday where actually two people died? Welcome to church. and again the question now is who would want to be part of a church like this?

[16:59] Do you remember Through the Keyhole with Lloyd Grossman? It's kind of over 45s isn't it? And he'd go around different celebrities' houses and he would ask who lives in a house like this? I can't do his accent.

The question would be who would want to live in a house like this? Who would want to be part of a church like this? It's not safe is it?

To be part of a church like this. Much will be expected of you. You will need to change like I do. There's no secrets from God.

Who would want to be part of a church like this? It's certainly uncomfortable isn't it? Even dangerous. Thankfully God doesn't seem to be in the business of disciplining people so drastically these days that God's holiness is no less exacting than it was then and yet God has given us eyes to see isn't it?

That there's no better place for us to be. This part of Acts 5 reminds you and I if we're part of this church very soberly of what we've signed up for.

[18:09] chapter 5 verse 12 the focus shifts from the church to the wider mission of Jesus that the believers are involved in.

The second half will be briefer. The focus shifts from what's being laid at the apostles feet to what is in the apostles hands. Verse 12 talks about what was being done by the hands of the apostles and once again the focus there is on these signs and wonders they're performing there are some incredible things that they're doing and when you've realised when you have read them you notice how powerful the apostles seem to people that people are even leaving their sick friends and relatives on the side of the street where the shadow of the apostle Peter might fall on them it was attractive many sick people many demon possessed people were brought to them and Luke says they were healed it's this unique stage of redemptive history and as we saw in Luke chapter 2 Acts chapter 2 this is the power of Jesus now being channeled through his apostles there are no apostles around today no one who's seen the life and ministry and resurrection of the Lord Jesus but what we're drawn to is the ministry of these apostles in their teaching and their acts mixes with very well there are very mixed reactions to it some really don't want to associate with them so verse 12 and now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles and they were all together in Solomon's portico and then it says none of the rest joined them but the people held them in high esteem but by contrast there are others who are hearing the message about Jesus and surrendering their lives in verse 14 more than ever believers were added to the Lord and multitudes of both men and women it seems that there's people in Jerusalem that are publicly terrified to join the church meetings happening in the colonnade of Solomon's portico but they're willing to receive the ministry of the apostles when they travel about and as they did many of them were saved but of course some people are not remotely interested in being saved and chief among those who are not queuing up for the apostles ministry are the Jewish leaders and verse 17 describes the ongoing conflict and in the first place Luke tells us that their jealousy leads to hostility Luke actually names what's in their hearts verse 17 the high priest rose up and all who were with him that's the party of Sadducees filled with jealousy envy and they arrested the apostles and put them in public prison and now we're not talking about any longer how the mission of Jesus proceeds when it's in the apostles hands but how the mission proceeds when the Jewish leaders are trying to direct its course and they do so don't they by laying their hands on God's messengers and Luke tells us that that power leads to humiliation I love this section because they try to prevent don't they the mission of Jesus proceeding that was their goal but their power to throw people in jail is utterly outstripped by the power of

Jesus whose mission it is so Luke describes doesn't he that an angel of the Lord comes and opens the door of the jail during the night and he tells the disciples go back to the temple from where you've been arrested and start preaching again and that's what they do the next morning the Jewish

Sanhedrin assembles for the next day they call for the apostles to be brought from jail one of the guards has to sheepishly go and tell the leaders listen the jail cell is empty we don't know where they are and no sooner have they delivered that message than another messenger comes and says those guys who arrested yesterday they're actually back in the temple and they're preaching it's a comical scene God gives these guys just a tiny glimpse of his authority and strength and the leaders are utterly humiliated once more the apostles are brought from their preaching to the authorities they don't use force this time verse 26 because they're afraid of the people and just notice when you put the fear of people and the fear of

[22 : 55] God alongside each other it shines doesn't it a light on the weakness of these Jewish leaders the fear of people leads to an ineffective command because Luke tells us next just how ineffective their instruction the day before had been despite what had happened overnight they continued to act as if they were in complete control of what was going on so look at verse 28 the Jewish leaders say we strictly charged you not to teach in his name we told you notice they can't even begin to bring themselves to name the name of Jesus and then there's this beautiful captivating turn of phrase it says this this is what these apostles have done is filled Jerusalem with this teaching over the day when that would be said of Ealing and of London that it was filled with the teaching of the gospel

Peter and the others respond verse 29 and they say we must obey God rather than human beings it's exactly the same thing they said a couple of weeks ago in chapter 419 do you remember what Peter and John replied they said whether it's right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than God well you must judge for we cannot but speak of what we've seen and heard for the apostles the choices are no brainer obey God or obey the Jewish leaders but they don't stop that having said that they launch into this explanation of the good news that we'll see again and again the apostles never miss a beat to proclaim what God has done they say verse 30 the God of our it's astonishing they continue to offer the crucifiers of Jesus the possibility of complete forgiveness but they are also very clear in calling on them to listen to God to listen to their testimony and to the testimony of the Holy Spirit and the apostles insist on calling the Jewish leaders to repent is more than most of them can bear they hear the message you got it wrong about Jesus massively wrong about Jesus and they respond verse 33 can you see it when they hear this they are enraged and want to kill them the chapter ends by telling us about this wise old Pharisee called Gamaliel who urges a more cautious approach and his wisdom leads to restraint he sagely reminds them that religious leaders religious movements come and go they flare up all the time and then they burn out as quickly as they got going and this could be one of them so verse 39 and this is a very poignant moment verse 39 he says this he says if it is of God you will not be able to stop them and you might even be found opposing God I think that is the message of Acts in one sentence if it is of

God you will not be able to stop them so instead of killing them the Sanhedrin has them flogged and tells them once again stop talking about Jesus an instruction that the apostles are not about to heed and their determination to keep on doing exactly what they've been told not to do is the note that Acts 5 strikes again so verse 41 then they left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name and every day in the temple and from house to house they did not stop teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus and that's really the place to end for the chapter because that's what the chapter is all about it's about the importance of obedience and so this chapter bounces around our minds this morning and it provokes us to freshly see why we must as a church obey

God too the whole chapter drives us in that direction Ananias and Sapphira remind us shockingly we have to say of why obedience matters and the church of Jesus Christ is no place for disobedience and the second half of the chapter the apostle set us an example of the opposite obedience verse 29 they say we must obey God verse 32 they say God has given his Holy Spirit do you notice to who to those who obey him and verse 42 in direct opposition to the command of the Jewish leaders the apostles do what Jesus has asked them to do they continue to proclaim the gospel and as the apostles obeyed so must!

[28 : 10] and so they stick with the mission of Jesus opposition notwithstanding for two key reasons and let me finish here first of all because we belong to his church and we should obey him because he is the lord of our church it is not ours it is his it operates on his power it is formed and nurtured by his truth and when we sin against the church we sin against him and when we need it to be corrected or disciplined or transformed it is he who ultimately changes us and Acts 5 reminds us

that the early churches of Acts are just like churches today just like our little church they are churches of Jesus Christ and we should obey him because we belong to his church the church that belongs to him and secondly

Acts 5 reminds us that it's not just his church it's his mission and the mission wasn't ultimately in the hands of the apostles and it certainly wasn't in the hands of the Jewish elders and it's not ultimately in our hands either it's in Jesus' hands the work of God in the world is the work that he directs and he progresses and he completes so we obey him because we serve his mission we do what he would have us to do because our life's work is nothing more and nothing less than his work and you and I live in a world don't we where people are regularly telling the church of Jesus Christ stop talking about Jesus and we do well don't we to heed the apostles persistent example of obedience to God and disobedience to the world this is a chapter that reminds you and I that Jesus is Lord Jesus is Lord of the church and he is Lord of the mission and he is the one we serve and he is the one we obey and Peter and the other apostles replied we must obey God rather than human beings so day after day in the temple courts and from house to house they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Lord do not stop let's pray