

# Great Power, Grace, Fear in Jerusalem Church (Acts 4:32-5:16)



## 1. Not a Perfect Church

- a. *'If you ever find the perfect church, don't join it otherwise you will ruin it.'* We sometimes long to find a perfect church to join, hoping our experience with this church will be better than the previous one. We Christians can be stuck in the past move of God or trapped in the past season of grace. But it is not possible to recapture the past as we imagine it. All we are given is today and there is only one pathway for God's people. We must keep our eyes on the Lord and go forward, and live out our faith daily.
- b. The Bible is absolutely honest. The early church was full of extraordinary grace. Yet, it was not a perfect church. They too had 'warts and all.' They leave us no room for entertaining an illusion of the perfect church. We must be grateful the church is made up of imperfect people like you and me. It tests our loyalty like marriage and family. Knowing the imperfections of one another, we still love, give, and forgive. *'This church is full of sinners, but there is always a room for one more.'*
- c. Structural Picture of the early church life – 4 Layers
  - 1) Corporate Church (4:32-35) – Private relationship inside the Church among the believers, 'koinonia'
  - 2) Individual Believers in the Church 1 (4:36-37) – Good Christian (Barnabas)
  - 3) Individual Believers in the Church 2 (5:1-11) – Bad Christian (Ananias & Saphira)
  - 4) Corporate Church (5:12-16) – Public relationship outside the Church.

## 2. Private Life of the Early Church (4:32-35)

- a. A unique feature of the Jerusalem church was 'koinonia' - common sharing. The way they shared their life and possession so freely went far beyond all other NT churches. The word, 'great' is used 4 times to describe the Jerusalem church (4:33; 5:5; 11). *'And with great power, the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all.'* (4:33). Koinonia upon the whole fellowship. GRACE is defined as '**God's Riches At Christ's Expanse.**' We freely receive what we do not deserve through Christ. The law of grace is - *'When you receive great grace it produces great gratitude, and great gratitude releases great generosity.'* Generosity is directly related to gratitude. Generous people are grateful people. Covetous people are ungrateful people. The believers in the Jerusalem church shared so freely to the point that they did not *'hold on to their things as their own'* (4:32) Their hands were open and as the result *'no one lacked anything in the church!'* (4:34) As soon as anyone had a need, it was met quickly. They would rather sell their land and property to meet the need rather than to see a brother go without. This is not normal grace, but great grace at work in the early church.
- b. However, Jerusalem church was a communal church, not a communist church: (i) Nobody forced anybody. It all came out of spiritual unity - *'one heart and one soul'* (4:32). They knew they were truly family and they belonged to each other. (ii) Private property law was not abolished. Peter said to Ananias, *'While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?'* (5:4) Ananias was in complete control before and after they sold the land. (iii) It was completely voluntary. People gave because they wanted to give (4:32). (iv) It happened spontaneously. There was no central planning to liquidate certain individuals. No 'rich people' list was drawn up. Nobody organised or suggested who should give up what. (v) The Jerusalem church achieved two things communism never achieved: *'abundance'* and *'love'* in the community. Not 'lack' and 'control'. Communism is always a reactionary movement to undo the imbalance of capitalism gone too far. Extreme concentration of wealth in a few creates an extremely unhappy majority who then rises up in a revolution. But they always eat up the golden goose that lays the golden eggs, leaving them no choice but to use control to keep the game going.
- c. The Bible teaches personal responsibility, hard work, reward, and respect for personal property. At the same time, God commands fairness and to show special concern for the poor. *'...There may be no poor among you; for the LORD will greatly bless you in the land...'* (Deut 15:4) The purpose of Jubilee – the debt cancellation law, was to teach God's people to practise of generosity which released His abundance and love. Sharing is a very enriching experience. We are created to share something valuable. We are created

for generosity because that is how we give and receive love. When we are tight-fisted, it demeans our humanity. The Jerusalem church practiced Jesus' commandment to love one another to the highest order. God's great grace produced great generosity among them to love God and love others (Matt 22:37-39 c.f. 1 John 3:17-18).

### 3. A Good Man in the Early Church – Barnabas (4:36-37)

- a. One of the men who practiced such generosity was 'Joses' or 'Joseph'. There were only two men who were called 'good' in the NT (c.f. 11:24), Joseph of Arimathea and Joseph Barnabas. Both had the name 'Joseph', and both were generous men. (Jesus refused to be called 'good' but attributed it to the Father). Joseph gave his tomb to lay Jesus' body in it, and Barnabas sold his land to meet the needs of the brothers. The Biblical attitude is stewardship. *What is mine is the Lord's. If the Lord has a need of it, here it is at His disposal.* That is what Barnabas did. Why was there such a great need in the church? During this time there was a severe economic downturn due to famine and political turmoil in Jerusalem. And it was particularly hard for the church because suddenly thousands were turning to Christ, and they were losing their jobs because of their faith in Jesus' name (c.f. 4:17). (C.f. Jeremias Jochim: *'Jerusalem in the time of Jesus'*, p121-122).
- b. Barnabas was a Levite called to serve the Lord in the temple. Levites were forbidden to own land because the Lord was their inheritance (c.f. Num 18:24). What was Barnabas doing in Cyprus, away from the temple, owning land, and in business? Barnabas' conversion must have been dramatic. It is most likely Barnabas was one of the first men to give generously to the needs of God's people, and in doing so released the powerful spirit of generosity in the church. 'Barnabas' was a name the apostles gave him - 'Son of Encouragement' (*'huios parakleseos'* very close to the Holy Spirit's title, 'Encourager'). Barnabas was not only generous, but he also encouraged brothers around him. Barnabas went to Tarsus to take Paul under his wings and mentored him, so Paul could go much further than Barnabas himself (11:24-25). These are the kinds of people who are most needed in the church.

### 4. A Bad Couple in the Early Church - Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11)

- a. Big 'BUT' opens Acts 5, like Joshua 7 which opens with a 'but' after the Jericho walls came tumbling down - BUT Israel was defeated in Ai because of Achan's sin. Ananias and Sapphira were warts in the Jerusalem church. This is a difficult passage because we see God dealing with sin in His camp severely. *'I thought we lived under the grace?'* Ironically, Ananias 'Hananiah' means *'YHWH is gracious.'* Sapphira is an Aramaic name, meaning 'beautiful.' Maybe this was what everyone in the Jerusalem church thought of them. This couple with beautiful and gracious names saw a different side of God one day.
- b. Ananias and Sapphira said to themselves, *'We will sell our field for \$100,000. We will keep \$50,000 for ourselves and give \$50,000 to meet the needs of the church.'* They could do anything they wanted with the proceeds from the sale of their land. It was theirs before and after they sold it. Their sin was not that they kept part of the proceeds. It was still a generous act. Their sin was in deceiving the church to be looked upon as more generous than they actually were, to be highly thought of than they ought. *'Look at them! Here is another couple just like Barnabas!'* Did they seek a special name from the apostles, 'Mr & Mrs Generous'? People might ignore it and move on, but the Spirit of God didn't. The Holy Spirit through Peter publicly uncovered their lie and the sin of 'hypocrisy'. In those days, actors wore masks on the stage and that mask was called 'hypocrite' that displayed a different face. Remember Jesus was compassionate to the woman caught in adultery, but openly and severely rebuked the Pharisees as white-washed tombs?
- c. What could have happened to the early church living in such selflessness and sincerity if this sin of hypocrisy went unchecked? The hypocrisy would have spread like gangrene and infect the whole church. There is nothing like hypocrisy that wrecks a church's reputation and damages the Christian witness. Peter said, *'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? You have not lied to men (church), but to God.'* (5:4) Ananias's heart was filled with Satan when he decided to give to the church. So, his motivation was sinful, not just his act. And when Ananias lied to the church it was the same as lying to God! Immediately Ananias fell dead, and young men carried his body out and buried him (4:3). Three hours later Sapphira came to the church, and Peter asked her, *'Did you sell your land for so much?'* She replied, *'Yes, for so much.'* Peter said to her, *'How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of*

*the Lord? The feet of those who buried your husband will carry you out.'* (4:9) Immediately, she too fell dead, and was buried next to her husband.

Peter confronted their sin and they just fell dead. What was the cause of their death? Heart attack? Hemorrhage? Dr Luke doesn't tell us, but 'breathed his last' (*ekpsycho*) literally means 'soul exit'. It describes God's judgment (Acts 5:4, 10, 12:23). Why did Ananias and Sapphira fall dead? Ananias and Sapphira probably served a greater purpose for the church in death than in life. The leaven of hypocrisy had to be purged from the church just as the sin of Achan from Israel. The church has far more to fear about the sin of hypocrisy inside than persecution from outside.

- d. 'Great fear' came upon the church (5:5; 11) and it is mentioned twice. Why? *'It could have been me. I was thought about doing the same thing!'* Three times the word 'great' is mentioned regarding the early church - 'great power', 'great grace' and 'great fear'. The early church was not perfect, but it was a 'great church' This is the first time the word 'church' is used in Acts out of 23 times in total (5:11). Unless you have the right view of the church you will not understand this passage. Church, *'ekklesia'* means 'people God has called out to Himself'. The church is the people whom God has called out to be His family. So, what we do to God's church is what we do to God. If you despise the church of God, you are despising God. If you attack the church of God, you are attacking God. If you are lying against the church, you are lying against God. If you are staying away from the church, you are staying away from God. If you love and bless the church, you are loving and blessing God. *'You have not lied to men, but to God' (5:4) and 'You have tested the Spirit of the Lord.'* (5:9). We need to be careful how we treat the Church.

## 5. Public Life of the Early Church (5:12-16)

- a. What happened to the church's public relations? Amazingly it did not bury the church's reputation, but the opposite was true. People esteemed the church highly (5:13). The early church met in Solomon's portico. Christian meetings were a public event, including the one involving Ananias and Sapphira. It was the *supernatural church* that could not be produced by human effort. It was the church of great power, grace, and fear of the Lord. Thus, God was busy working among them.
- i. Signs and wonders began to spread from Peter to other apostles just as they have asked the Lord (5:12 c.f. 4:30). One of the first results of God stretching out His hand was Ananias and Sapphira being struck in judgment.
  - ii. Unity in the church was maintained as they continued to meet in Solomon's portico (5:12). If they did not deal with this hypocrisy by confronting it by the Holy Spirit, the purity, unity, witness, and power of the church would have been lost.
  - iii. A clear boundary between believers and the world was drawn (5:5:13). There was no grey area. The clear separation between the church and the world did not damage the church.
  - iv. Evangelism was effective among men and women (5:14). The converts' numbers are no longer reported as it became difficult to count. The believers were 'added to the Lord.'
  - v. The Holy Spirit's power in their midst to heal the sick and cast out demons increased (5:15). People brought the sick to the streets so that Peter's shadow might fall on them!
  - vi. People began to come from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem (5:16) and all who came met God.
- b. Question
- i. God only works with the original. He doesn't produce carbon copies. However, we should ask the question: 'Do I really want to belong to a church like this? Of great power, great grace, great fear where Spirit's power manifested, and love and generosity are practiced with one another, and hypocrisy dealt with publicly?'
  - ii. Will God do it again? Though not exactly the same way, but in the same power, grace, and fear of the Lord? God says in the last days He will pour out His Spirit upon all flesh. In the book of Acts, God has shown us what He can do with His church of imperfect people such as you and me.