

SCRIPTURE STUDIES

SERIES: A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS**ACTS CHAPTER 5****“THROUGH TROUBLE TO TRIUMPH”**

The more we study the book of Acts the more we will see that the problems that face the church today are no different than the problems that faced the early church. We would do well, therefore, to learn the lessons that the book of Acts contains, for in a sense is the pre-written history of the church in all ages.

Chapter 5 of the book of Acts, like chapter 4, begins with problems and ends with praise. Previously, we have seen attacks on the infant Church from without. Now, we see, for the first time, an attack from within. Up to this time the foe has been external, now it is internal. One enemy inside the camp is more dangerous and deadly than 100 outside the camp.

HARMONY WAS A MARK OF THE NEW CHURCH.

As chapter 4 concludes, we see the young church harmoniously functioning. The last paragraph in chapter 4 sets before us a spirit of unity, harmony and generosity that should be the experience of every true church of Jesus Christ. This is the record:

“Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” (Acts 4:32-37)

The atmosphere in that first church and the attitude of those first Christians is beautiful to behold! This was a display of love, togetherness, concern and care that should characterize every Christian congregation. Many of them had actually seen the risen Savior; some of them had been in the Upper Room on the birthday of the church. Now, filled with the Spirit of Christ and the enthusiasm innate in their new-found faith, their exuberance motivated them to exhibit unbridled aggressiveness, to the extent that they went beyond what was required of them.

The example of the newly formed church in selling lands, houses, etc. and forming a commune is not incumbent upon the church in perpetuity. They had all things, not by command but by consent. It was not a compulsion but concern that motivated them. This practice did not continue for long for it hindered the fulfillment of the great commission to “go into all the world.”

In chapter 8 we read that "*they were scattered abroad*" (v.4) and they went everywhere preaching the Word. Evidently, it was not God's will for such a practice to continue. In order for such a practice to continue it would mean that they would all have to continue to live together in a communal setting and consequently could not and would not carry out the Great Commission.

Their actions are indeed commendable, however, it is not recorded that the practice was continued in other New Testament churches. The instructions for Christian giving are articulated in 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9.

It is glaringly evident that they loved the Lord Jesus, each other and the newly founded Church. It is very doubtful that the apostles had to go visiting healthy absentee members to remind them that they should be in attendance! Every week there was a family reunion. And, do not forget, that this church was functioning in enemy territory and very soon some of their number would be killed for their faith!

Do you remember the words of Timothy Dwight's hymn? Here are some of the stanzas:

"I love Thy church, O God.
Her walls before Thee stand,
Dear as the apple of Thine eye,
And written on Thy hand.

For her my tears shall fall
For her my prayers ascend,
To her my cares and toils be given
Till toils and cares shall end.

Beyond my highest joy
I prize her heavenly ways,
Her sweet communion, solemn vows,
Her hymns of love and praise."

Paul writes, "*Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her.*" (Eph.5:25) Do we love the church for which Christ died, with the quality of love displayed by members of the very first church? Do we attend it, defend it, commend it and extend it?

Did you ever hear someone say, "Why go to church? I can worship God at the seaside, on the mountainside, at my bedside!" You may have heard those or similar words from "freelance" Christians, who want to do their own thing apart from other believers.

There are several principles ignored in such an attitude:

- First, God wants you to be involved in a family meeting with Him. The Word says, "*Do not forsake assembling together*" (Heb.10:25a);
- Second, others need you. Your presence encourages others. "*Encouraging one another*" (Heb.10:25b);

- Third, you need others. While the words, “Birds of a feather flock together” are not in the Bible, the principle is. If a soldier acted like some “lone ranger” Christians act, he would be punished for being A.W.O.L. The absent Christian soldier punishes himself by denying himself the blessings of Christian comradeship. Soldiers need to rub shoulders with other soldiers!
- Fourth, the sinners around you need to see you exhibiting a love and loyalty to the church which helps validate the faith you say you possess! Recently, our unsaved neighbor said to another neighbor, “I see them going to church. We’re thinking about going also.” There are many ways to give testimony of your Christian faith. Regular, faithful church attendance is one way.

HYPOCRISY INVADED THE ASSEMBLY. Acts 5:1-11

“But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles’ feet. But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him. Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter answered her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?” She said, “Yes, for so much.” Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.”

The harmony of the young church, as seen in the closing paragraph in chapter 4, is beautiful. It is the canvas upon which the ugly portraits of a man and his wife are painted in the first verses of chapter 5. Notice the first word of chapter 5: *“But.”* This of course ties chapter 5 in with what had transpired in chapter 4.

Wherever God is at work, the devil is also active. God’s work is never destroyed by the devil, but the devil can and does temporarily disrupt God’s workers from time to time. The devil hates united, harmonious and joyful Christian congregations. He, therefore, wants to inject his poison, which comes in various forms. James writes, *“For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.”* (James 3:16) If it is not there, he plants it and aids the spread of the infection.

What was it that disturbed the harmony in the first church? The new-born church in Jerusalem was enjoying the freshness and beauty of new life in Jesus Christ, when the devil influenced and injected into that harmonious assembly, the germ of hypocrisy. The selfless and sacrificial example of Barnabas is the backdrop to the selfish and hypocritical actions of a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira in chapter 5.

Barnabas had just consummated a real-estate deal and had, by prior decision, put the money in the treasury of the church. This shining example of Christian stewardship earned for Barnabas and honorable mention in the Word of God.

But we also have a dishonorable mention in connection with giving. In the same church with Barnabas was a Christian couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who are good examples of bad stewardship. This couple also had real-estate and perhaps because of the selfless example of Barnabas, they felt compelled to imitate his example and therefore sold their property. In outward appearances the actions were similar, but in reality they were very different for in verse 2 we read that they *"kept back part of the proceeds."* It was not the mere keeping back part of the price that constituted the sin of these two. Peter made it quite clear that they were under no obligation to sell, and after selling they still were not required to give all or any of the proceeds.

What then was the sin? The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was the sin of pretending that part was all. It was the sin of hypocrisy, of attempting to appear to be what they really were not; of endeavoring to make it appear that they had done what they really have not done. The sin was that of lying. Peter asked, *"Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied on demand, but under God."* (v.4) Both Ananias and Sapphira had agreed beforehand to lie. They intended the church to think that they were doing the same thing that Barnabas did. It was pretense - hypocrisy!

Hypocrisy made Christ angry. What severe things he said to those who pretended to be religious; what scorching, blasting words He spoke against them! He called them: *"hypocrites"* (Matt.23:27); *"snakes"* (Matt. 12:34); *"whitewashed tombs"* (Matt.23:29) and said, *"You are of your father the devil."* (John 8:44)

One word which presents no difficulty for the translator of languages is the word "hypocrite," for such persons exist in all societies. In the Amazonian jungle, Indian tribes have a variety of ways of denoting duplicity; one tribe, describes a hypocrite as "One with two faces." Another tribe, "A man with two hearts." Others, "People with two kinds of talk"; "A two headed man," "A forked tongue person"; "A two-sided man." The Black Thai people of Vietnam have summarized the characteristics of a hypocrite with keen discernment when they call a hypocrite "one with a straight mouth and a crooked heart."

Their hypocrisy was exposed for all to see. This expose' reveals at least four facts:

- 1) One of Satan's strategies for robbing the church of its power is to infect it with dishonestly, hypocrisy.
- 2) It is possible for a Christian in the best of churches, surrounded by people who are full of God's Spirit (Acts 4:31), to be influenced by Satan. (Acts 5:3). You can be sure that when God is doing His work, the devil is not idle.
- 3) Satan's influence does not take away a person's responsibility for his or her own choices. New Testament giving is not an obligation but a free choice. (Acts 5:4) *"So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver."* (II Cor.9:7)
- 4) To lie to one's fellow believers is to lie to God. (Acts 5:4)

Not everyone who lies in church dies in church! The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira were caused by the act of a loving God correcting His children. The discipline was not just for hypocritical givers but a lesson to the entire church. The whole Christian community quickly developed a healthy respect for God.

Was God too hard on this couple? Some may tend to say what they did was not that big of a deal, that it was a petty sin. In God's sight, there are no petty sins. Here, at the beginning of the church movement, God sent a strong message to the church in the ages to come, by putting a stop to playing "let's pretend." *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."* (Prov.9:10)

It is interesting that both in the early history of the nation of Israel and the early history of the church, there are glaring illustrations of the deadliness and seriousness of cheating on God when it comes to the use of possessions. In the early days of the nation of Israel, Achan is dealt with very severely with regard to possessions (Joshua 7) and here in acts chapter 5, at the beginning of the church, we have the story Ananias and Sapphira. Just as Achan had jeopardized the camp of Israel by his covetousness, so a and S. endangered the progress of the infant Church by their actions. The first sin in the ranks of Israel after they entered the Promised Land, the sin of Achan, and the first outburst of sin in the early church, were alike punished with divine judgment.

*"Though the mills of God grind slowly,
Yet they grind exceeding small;
Though with patience he stands waiting,
With exactness He grinds all."*

Billy Sunday, the evangelist of years gone by, said, "The sins of the sanctuary are more damaging to the work of God than the sins of the saloon."

Was the penalty too severe? Let us consider what they did:

- they disrupted the fellowship of the saints;
- they introduced into the church the same thing that Adam brought into the human race and with which Achan blighted the camp of Israel;
- they made mockery of the high act of worship of which Barnabas was a shining example;
- they set their hearts on gain rather than godliness;
- they lied to the Holy Spirit;
- they polluted the church's purity and paralyzed the church's progress.

This sin is recorded in holy Scripture so that we might see how jealous Jesus Christ is of His Bride, the church. All that corrupts or stains the garments of the church's holiness must be removed, for the holy church is the powerful church. Thank God that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's son, cleanses us from all sin. You and I, as believers, may daily confess our sins and maintain fellowship with our Savior and one another.

The judgment of the sin of Ananias and Sapphira proves that the church was holy and that the slightest deviation from holy standards was not tolerated. A wholesome fear was engendered, both within and without the church. Within the church there was a fear of God, a

dread of sin, a new sense of the holiness of God. Without, there was fear to join such a church except upon a credible confession of faith, true repentance and regeneration.

How could Ananias and Sapphira commit such a sin? How can any sin get into the life of a believer? The answer is in this statement in verse 4: *“Why have you conceived this thing in your heart?”* Sin is conceived in the heart and then carried out in the life. You have seen an apple with a worm-hole in it. Did the worm enter the apple from the outside or did the worm come from inside the apple?

Many would say that the worm came from the outside and entered into the apple. But the botanist tells us that the worm began on the inside. As a matter of fact, they tell us that the egg was laid in the blossom and that the worm was hatched in the heart of the apple and bored its way to the outside.

That is precisely the way the worm of sin works in the human life. It begins in the heart and bores its way out to the outside. Jesus said, *“For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.”* (Matt.15:19) Therefore, *“Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of the heart are the issues of life.”* (Prov.4:23)

The devil always has a strategy to disrupt harmonious Fellowships of believers and one of his favorite tools is hypocrisy. Let us all be on guard against this and all sins that could invade, infect and invalidate the Christian church’s testimony. With the burial of Ananias and Sapphira, the church returned to its mission and ministry with unabated zeal.

HISTORY CONTINUED TO BE MADE. Acts 5:12-16

“And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon’s Porch. Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.”

Christ’s church, although often hindered is never defeated. Jesus said, *“I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”* (Matt. 16:18) This history-making first church in Jerusalem was so on fire for God that when two germs invaded the assembly they were immediately exterminated! They continued to move ahead in spite of two “bumps in the road” and we read that *“believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”* (Acts 5:14)

Sacred as well as secular history records many seeming setbacks for the church. The last seven churches listed in the New Testament, in Revelation chapters two and three, were not comprised of perfect humans. Jesus sent a letter to each one admonishing them and yet, he church throughout history continued to make history and it continues to this day to make history!

The hymn, "The Church's One Foundation," written by Samuel J. Stone in 1866, with music by Samuel S. Wesley, contains a verse that is not usually in our present-day hymn books. It is one of the best verses:

*"The Church shall never perish!
Her dear Lord to defend,
To guide, sustain, and cherish,
Is with her to the end:
Though there be those who hate her,
And false sons in her pale,
Against both foe or traitor
She ever shall prevail."*

That early church was so irresistibly attractive to people who were sick and tired of religious hypocrisy and the heavy handed religious rulers who were enforcing rigid rules and regulations, that they were drawn to the early church by loving and caring people whose gracious lifestyle and authenticity was a breath of fresh air in a stale culture. The church attracted people hungry for reality.

Our country, culture, cities and churches also hunger for the genuine. Why do we not see churches growing by leaps and bounds as did the early church? One reason is because the Gospel message and the Gospel messengers are isolated - we have "compartmentalized" Christianity" in America. Christians gather in isolated groups, while the majority of our citizens are not contacted or impacted by the Gospel. Our Christianity is a sideline not the mainline purpose with the average church. Early Christian's main-lined the message of the Gospel!

Notice how the early Church exerted its influence:

- they were on Solomon's porch - verse 12;
- they were in the streets - verse 15;
- they were in the prison - verse 18;
- they were in the temple - verse 21;
- they were before the council - verse 27;
- they were in every house - verse 42.

Let us permeate our society as this first church did. Jesus said, "*You are the salt of the earth.*" How will our community be salted with heavenly salt if we are isolationists?

HOSTILITY INCREASED AGAINST THE APOSTLES. Acts 5:17-21

"Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life." And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought."

There Was Haughty Indignation – "*The high priestthey were filled with indignation.*"

There Was Hasty Incarceration - “put them in the common prison”

As far as the Jewish officials were concerned it was a crime to be a follower of Jesus Christ. There was no doubt about it, the apostles were "guilty" of being Christians. They were commanding great respect throughout the city of Jerusalem and environs. The jealousy of the established religious authorities boiled over and the apostles suddenly became jailbirds!

Often in history, civil and religious authorities have thought that they could stop the advancement of the Church of Jesus Christ by removing its human leaders. During the first three centuries, the Christians most likely to be martyred were the church leaders. It is a common error among the enemies of the Church of Jesus Christ to mistake human leaders for the head's of the church. The removal of human leaders has never stopped the advancement of the church because the Head of the church is Jesus Christ! (Eph. 1:20-23) Church leaders as well as all true disciples of Jesus Christ are but followers, and associates.

There Was Heavenly Intervention – “But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out...”

What I am going to say next may be misunderstood, but it is nevertheless the truth. The best thing short of a heaven sent revival that could come to the church is persecution. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Persecution purges the church of mere professors; proves whether it is real or not; whether its members are truly people of faith and whether the church is a praying church or not, etc. Persecution is the furnace that purifies and burns out the counterfeit leaving the genuine for all to see. There are people who want to know God and want to be identified with that which is authentic. That is what took place in the first church. Being right with God often means being in trouble with men.

There Was Holy Instruction – “Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.”

HIERARCHY FLEXED its MUSCLES. Acts 5:22-28

“But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, saying, “Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!” Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. So one came and told them, saying, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!” Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, saying, “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!”

The High Priest convened the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Israel, and sent the guards to bring the prisoners before the court. The guards found the cell as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard, and the guards returned empty-handed. Someone brought news that the disciples were at the temple, preaching. The guards went to the temple and re-arrested the disciples, handling them very gently because of fear of the people.

The High Priest and his cronies had tried to stop the advancement of the church by threatening Peter and John with bodily harm if they mentioned Jesus' name in public again. (Acts 4:18,21) This did not stop the apostles. The high council was infuriated. They said, *"You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching!"* An outburst of rage erupted against the apostles.

These old men in priestly robes leaped to their feet and shook angry fists at the disciples. One of Israel's most respected teachers, Gamaliel, intervened and calmed the uproar. Gamaliel's most famous student was Saul of Tarsus, the apostle Paul (Acts 22:3). As far as we know he was not a Christian. He counseled the Sanhedrin to stop their actions against these Christians. He said that if their movement was not of God it would fail anyway. If it was from God, fighting them would be fighting against God which was not a wise thing to do. His counsel to the council prevailed.

The success of the Christian witnesses filled the religious leaders with jealousy. They arrested the apostles. An angel freed them, and they went on preaching. However, some of the council members wanted to kill them. Did that stop them from spreading the Good News? No!

HOMILY TIME AGAIN FOR PETER. Acts 5:29-32

"But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."

The disciples responded to this warning not to speak in Jesus name as they had responded to the first one -- with quiet defiance. Before their bruises were healed they were back teaching in the temple court and from house to house. They were saturating Jerusalem with the Good News about Jesus Christ the Messiah. The opposition that they experienced opened the door of opportunity to spread their message and they took advantage of it.

Good old Peter never missed an opportunity to preach! A homily is a sermon and Peter and the other apostles boldly confronted this austere Supreme Court of Israel, confuting, charging and challenging them:

- They affirmed their loyalty to God – *"We ought to obey God rather than men."*
- They announced the resurrection – *"The God of our fathers raised up Jesus."*
- They accused them of murder - *"you murdered by hanging on a tree."*
- They affirmed Jesus' exalted position – *"Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."*
- They associated themselves with the mission and ministry of the Holy Spirit – *"And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."*

They pulled no punches, they shot straight from the shoulder, they told it like it was. These disciples went into the den and bearded the lion! Of course, these Jewish leaders folded their tent, kowtowed to the disciples, capitulated, apologized and dismissed the apostles with their

blessing. NOT SO! *“When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them.”* (Acts 5:33)

Were they not fearful? *“Perfect love casts out fear.”* (I John 4:18) These early evangelists were firm believers in what Jesus had said to them earlier: *“He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.”* (Matt. 10:38)

Their message was of such a nature that they were willing to hazard their lives to propagate it. Two of the greatest hindrances to witnessing are a cold heart and cold feet.

ILLUST. The early American evangelist, Peter Cartwright, had neither a cold heart or cold feet! One day he was conducting a service in a church when President Andrew Jackson unexpectedly showed up. The deacons hurriedly called the preacher from the pulpit and informed him of the distinguished visitor. They asked Cartwright to be careful about what he said. As he returned to the pulpit to continue his message he said, "I understand that President Andrew Jackson is with us today, and I have been requested to be guarded in my remarks. Andrew Jackson will go to Hell as quickly as any other man if he does not repent!"

The audience was shocked, wondering how the president would react. At the close of the meeting, the President stepped forward to speak to Cartwright. "Sir," he said, "if I had a regiment of men like you, I could whip the world."

HAPPY CHRISTIANS CONTINUED WITNESSING. Acts 5:40-42

“And when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.” (Acts 5:40-42)

The Religious Leaders Actions: The punishment they inflicted; The prohibition they imposed.

The Christian Leaders Attitude: They rejoiced to be worthy to suffer; they resumed witnessing of the Savior.

The early church shows us how to triumph over trouble. They triumphed over internal problems and they triumphed over external opposition. The power of God was being manifested in a miraculous way, sinners were being saved, the population was astir, the church was growing. They were living in the afterglow of Pentecost. Their souls were aflame for Jesus Christ.

You cannot stop a child of God who is fired by the divine fuel of the Holy Spirit.

- Lions will not eat him,
- Fire will not burn him,
- Prisons cannot hold him,
- Beatings will not stop him and
- Threats will not scare him!

As soon as the enemies of the Gospel of Jesus Christ had done their worst, the disciples were at their best. *"They departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name."*

The early church went from tragedy to triumph - there was the tragedy of the sinning couple, but God quickly judged them and the church moved on to triumph. This first church should serve as a great example and encouragement to us.

Let us be the quality of salt and light that the Lord Jesus called us to be, and we too will make history! So what if we are not appreciated on earth. The Lord Jesus will smile upon us from heaven and say, "Well done!" And we too will be a church triumphant!

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