

## Lesson 7: Acts 4:32-5:16 Internal Threat

### Introduction

In our last lesson we addressed an external threat to the new New Covenant community. The established leaders of Jerusalem arrested Peter and John in the middle of a sermon, tried them, beat them and commanded that they teach no longer in the name of Jesus. This external opposition brought the community of believers together in prayer and reinforced their conviction to persevere in bearing witness to Jesus Christ.

Luke's next report concerns an internal threat. This threat occurs in the context of sharing material wealth in the earliest Christian movement. Ananias and Saphira lie about their generosity. That lie is addressed by God seriously and severely. I put off discussing the issue of communal property when it was raised in chapter 2, so let's begin in the first half of this lesson by addressing that facet of the early Church in Jerusalem. Then in the second half of the lesson we will proceed with the internal threat of hypocrisy introduced into the community by Ananias and Saphira.

The issue of communal property is raised in the summary at the end of chapter 4 that bridges the external threat and the internal threat. This is Acts 4:32-35.

### Communal Property in the New Covenant Community (4:32-35)

<sup>32</sup> And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of *them* claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. <sup>33</sup> And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales <sup>35</sup> and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

The external threat drove the community to galvanizing prayer that reinvigorated their proclamation of Jesus Christ. They were not torn apart by the pressure of the threat but continued on in an impressive show of unity. They are of one heart and one soul. Those are not just words. The wealthy show it by selling property to care for their brothers and sisters in need. Continued witness has a practical impact in this early community.

The communal sharing of property we see here raises for us again that question of whether this report from Luke is meant to be descriptive or prescriptive. Is Luke telling us how all Christian communities ought to be or is he describing for us how a particular Christian community behaved under certain circumstances? Our approach to answering that question requires observing Scripture at different levels of focus. We start focused in very close and then expand our focus outwards to take in more and more text. First, we need to identify what the text we are looking at actually says. And in this case, we need to do that both with this passage, Acts 4:32-35, and with the parallel passage, Acts 2:42-47. Second, we need to expand our focus to what we know about the immediate context of these two passages. Third, we need to expand our focus even further to consider the context of the whole book of Acts. And fourth, we need to widen out to consider the context of the New Testament. We could go even one more step and consider the context of all of the Bible. But that is getting beyond what I want to do in this lesson. That would be good if we were considering the full approach to finances as taught in Scripture, but I'm focusing more specifically on how wealth is to be viewed within this New Covenant community.

#### 1. What does the text say?

So first, what does the text say? Verse 32 tells us, "Not one of *them* claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them." Verse 34-35 tells us, "There was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need."

Chapter 2:44-45 had already told us something similar, “And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.”

What we see in the text, just what we observe without interpreting it, looks like pretty radical behavior.

First, there is a rejection of personal claim to wealth. “Not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own.”

Second, there is an assertion that possessions belong in some sense to all. “All things were common property to them.”

Third, that property was distributed by the Apostles, after the legal owners sold the land and gave that money to the Apostles.

Fourth, the proceeds are used exclusively here for the needy in the community. We are not told the proceeds pay the Apostles’ salary, or pay for the church buildings and the utilities. We are only told that the proceeds are distributed to those in need in this community of believers.

Fifth, as a result of this distribution of wealth, there is not a needy person among them.

Those are the facts we observe in the text.

## *2. What is the immediate context?*

Second, we need to expand our focus to the immediate context of these two passages. We know this is a unique time in the history of God’s people. The Church has just been born in Jerusalem. Thousands have believed. The first influx of believers included Jews and God-fearers from various locations throughout the Roman and Persian empires who are in Jerusalem for the Passover.

The Apostles are teaching daily in the Temple. Believers are gathering together daily for meals, for prayer, for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Healing miracles are being performed by all the Apostles. There is a lot of excitement. A lot is going on.

Luke has not reported any sermon by the Apostles that is encouraging this attitude of common ownership of property. They are not telling the believers to sell their goods and lay the proceeds at the Apostles’ feet. At least Luke hasn’t told us that they’re telling anybody that. The sharing of property seems to be a grass-roots response, or an internal response in these wealthy believers who are motivated, moved by the Holy Spirit to meet the needs of the community.

Two comments in the context suggest further connections. The Acts 2 passage ends by telling us the new believers were “praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” There is not a direct connection to “having favor with all the people” and sharing their possessions with those in need. But it does seem to be part of the whole package. The teaching, the miracles, the behavior of the believers creates a favorable impression by the non-believers in Jerusalem. If the favorability by non-believers is somewhat engendered by the observation that these Christians care for the needy among them, that would be an example of what Jesus said in John 13:35, “[they] will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

I think there is a connection here between the favorable impression that is being made, and this very real, practical love being shown among these believers. Another connection is made in Acts 4:33. After reporting on the sharing of common property, Luke writes, “And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.” Luke mentions common property. Then he mentions the continued witness of the Apostles to the resurrection then he says, “and abundant grace was on them all.” What does he mean that abundant grace was on them all? You know, my mind first just thinks of the Gospel and forgiveness; and I’ve received the grace of Jesus Christ; I have a new identity; I’m loved. I’m thinking of the spiritual blessing of the Gospel, that is being poured out lavishly. But Luke makes a logical connection from this verse to

the next verse using the word, “for.” He says, “...abundant grace as on them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales.” This “abundant grace on them” is described for us by Luke as a care for all the people among them. The grace is not only spiritual. The grace is the Holy Spirit working in the wealthy to care for the poor. And the poor are experiencing that grace very practically. So, this immediate context around this communal sharing connects the proclamation of the Gospel with change in the behavior of believers that makes a positive impact on others. The abundance of grace is spiritual and material. This is not the Prosperity Gospel. This is not people becoming wealthy. In fact, it seems to be people giving up wealth. This is the Gospel making a real, sacrificial impact on the life of people. And that seems to be an important theme in these first chapters of Acts. Luke chooses what stories he is going to report on. And he has chosen to tell us twice about the sharing of communal property. And both internal threats to the early Church are going to have to do with money and the distribution of wealth. The Gospel in the early Church made an impact on believers. All the teaching we are getting is spiritual truths and forgiveness in Jesus. But then we are getting these stories and we are seeing how this spiritual message is making an impact on the material reality; the physical reality of believers in of how they see their responsibility to one another.

This flow of thought seems to be true in the immediate context. The Apostles are giving witness to Jesus. People are believing the witness. Belief is affecting how they see their possessions and their desire to meet the needs of others in the community. Because of their perspective about wealth and about each other, the wealthy are selling possessions to meet the needs of other believers. That sacrificial love expressed toward one another is one way that abundant grace is experienced in the community and is also one of the traits of this new community that finds favor with the people in the larger society.

We recognize that this is a special context. There is a major revival going on in Jerusalem. It is the unique situation of the birth of the Church. There may be thousands of visitors continuing on in Jerusalem who came for the Passover and believed. And yet, along with something special going on there is this practical effect in society. How do we know whether the behavior of these believers is a description of something very unique, very special or is a pattern for all communities of faith?

### *3. What does the rest of the book of Acts say?*

Third, we need to take our focus out a little further and consider the context of the whole book of Acts. As we look at the rest of Acts, do the sermons of Peter and Paul encourage joint possession of all property or do we see evidence of the new Christian communities exhibiting the same behavior that is going on here in Jerusalem?

This is an interesting thing. Peter and Paul continue to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ wherever they go. But Luke never gives a report of their preaching that addresses this topic of common ownership. Luke also does not report on the practice of communal property among the growing Christian communities in Judea and in Samaria and out into the Gentile territories. We don’t see it or hear it in the rest of Acts.

This is not conclusive evidence that these churches did not share property in common. Luke may have simply not reported on it. But the silence is interesting, and it makes us wonder.

### *4. What do the New Testament Epistles say?*

So fourth, we need to expand our focus even more to consider the context of the whole of the New Testament. And for the second time, I’m not going to focus on the Gospels. I’m going to focus on the Epistles. Because we want to know specifically what teaching is given to early churches and what description do we see in early churches in their behavior about this issue. This final step in determining whether a report in Acts is descriptive or prescriptive is especially important when we consider the genre difference between Acts and the Epistles.

Acts is narrative while the Epistles are prose discourse. The Epistles are letters written to churches and individuals to answer questions and provide instruction on correct doctrine and correct practice.

That is what the letters are. They are written more directly. Acts is telling us the story of what happened. That's why we have this problem of descriptive versus prescriptive, because Acts is narrative. We know Luke is writing about the experience of the early churches. We know he is describing to us what was taught and behaviors that were going on. And his narrative is theological, but it is still narrative. He does not directly enter into the narrative and explain what should apply to us. He is telling us the story. And creates a little more work for us to figure out what applies to us.

And as I said, the Epistles are more direct. They are full of imperative. Do this. Don't do that. They are not systematic theologies or instruction manuals. So they are not fully comprehensive. They are letters written into a particular context. So, we still have to pay attention to context. Still, the letters have this purpose, which is to give specific direction to the early Christian communities.

If we discover something in the narrative of Acts that might be prescriptive, we do well to double check our interpretation in the Epistles. Taking our current example, we see the sharing of common property here in Acts 2 and 4, but we do not see it played out in the rest of Acts. So we are wondering whether communal property was meant to be true of all Christian communities, and in wondering that we ask, "What about the Epistles? Do Paul and Peter and James instruct believers to view their possessions as common property? Are they directed to sell what they have and lay it at the feet of the elders in the churches?"

And quite frankly, the answer is going to be, "no." I'll challenge you to do a more thorough study of the New Testament teaching on this subject but I am not seeing instruction from these leaders to this first generation of believers to share everything they have in common. We see it at the time of the Jerusalem Awakening but we do not see it in the letters to Rome, or Galatia, or Ephesus, or Philippi, or Colossae, or Thessalonica. Paul does not tell Timothy or Titus to teach this about communal property in the churches that they are leading. Even though James is dealing with issues between rich and poor, he does not promote this idea of common possession of property. And we do not read it in Peter, or John, or Jude, or the letter to the Hebrews.

And this is not because the topic of money does not come up. Money is addressed regularly. For example, Paul writes to the Corinthians,

Each one *must do* just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

You know, are they to give? Yes, they are to give. And he writes to the Thessalonians,

<sup>11</sup> and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, <sup>12</sup> so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need. (1 Thessalonians 4:11–12)

And to the Ephesians,

He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have *something* to share with one who has need. (Ephesians 4:28)

And to Timothy,

<sup>8</sup> But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Timothy 5:8).

James writes,

If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that? (James 2:15–16)

And Peter instructs us to,

Be hospitable to one another without complaint (1 Peter 4:9).

We do not see in the New Testament Epistles exhortation to sell property or a teaching of communal ownership. Believers are to work in order to provide for their own family, so that they might have funds to share with others. They are to give from their heart, cheerfully as an act of worship.

*Wisdom and Conviction*

So how do we interpret what is going on with the sharing of property at the birth of the Church in Jerusalem and what principles there still might apply to us?

Because I do not see in the New Testament after Acts 5 either the teaching or the practice of communal ownership of property and because I do see other references that imply individual responsibility regarding wealth, I am led to interpret the sharing of property here in Jerusalem as a special occurrence within a specific context. I believe this is description about this great awakening, not prescription for all churches everywhere.

How then do I interpret this special moment in the life of the Church? That becomes more difficult. We have what the text has given us. It would be nice to have more. I wonder if there is a special need created by hundreds or thousands of people staying in Jerusalem during this revival. You know, maybe the extended revival creates a lot of need.

And that may be part of the story. I do not believe that is the whole story. The distribution of goods is for people who are in need, not people who traveled from outside. In chapter 6, this will specifically relate to widows. That seems less like the case of a feast lasting weeks longer than planned and more like a response to a social problem. I then wonder if the social problem is created when people chose to identify with Jesus Christ and are thus no longer cared for by existing Jewish structures. But we are not told that, not here. It could be part of the story. But at this early stage we do not have indication that these people are excluded from societal help because they are Christians. Financial loss as a consequence of following Jesus is going to happen. Again, the New Testament does not preach or teach Prosperity Gospel. But that loss of property does not seem to have happened yet.

Here in the early life of the Church we see the Gospel of Jesus Christ making a powerful impact on how these early believers feel about their own wealth and how they view the needs of brothers and sisters in Christ. They willingly view themselves as part of a unified community to which they have personal obligation. My need is your need. Your need is my need. Who will do something about that need? Well, if I can, I will. It's rising up out of individual responsibility and individual choice about how they use their wealth. So, they might see it as property that's for everybody. They are still the ones that are responsible for that property.

And on one hand, the selling of land and property to meet the needs of the poor is a limited solution. If everyone sells everything, then as soon as the community stops attracting new believers with more wealth, the wealth is gone. It was sold to care for needs. Believers need to keep land and homes and businesses for the ongoing care of others who are not well off. For the care of their families, and for the care of their brothers and sisters in Christ, and even for the help of people outside of the community. And what happens when they spend all the wealth? The financial wisdom of Scripture encourages believers to work hard, to save money, to provide for your families, and to share with others.

Taken without qualification, the behavior of the rich selling everything is not in the end a wise approach. Individual wealth is gone, so the members of the Church become poor.

My daughter Julia introduced our family to Andy Stanley's series on wisdom called, "askit." It's still out there on the Internet. It's great. Just search, "askit." As a result, it is not unusual that when someone in our family is struggling with a decision, someone else will ask the question from that series, "What's the wise thing to do?" Sounds almost too simple to be helpful, but really, we often know what the wise thing to do, we just don't want to do it, or we don't think about it. But as soon as you just ask the question, you're like, "Oh, yeah, I know what the wise thing is to do." It is just not always fun when one of us says something like, "Hey, let's have a Lord of the Rings marathon!" And

then someone else says, “Well, what is the wise thing to do?” And we all immediately know that watching an 11-hour film trilogy non-stop is not the wise thing to do. But it sure is the fun thing to do. And sometimes, we decide, sometimes fun trumps wise. We are going to do the fun thing.

As believers, sometimes generosity trumps wisdom. The accountants, the bankers cannot always run the use of finances in the Christian Church. The Holy Spirit led Mary to lavishly pour out expensive perfume valued at a year’s wages - a year’s wages! A year! - on the feet of Jesus in a moment. In minutes, and it’s gone. That wealth is gone. Mary was not acting according to the dictates of financial wisdom. And she gets criticized for it. “That could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor.” But then Jesus comes to her defense, “Leave her alone. This was done for me.” She has committed an extravagant act of worship out of love.

Sometimes conviction of the heart, conviction deep in the soul trumps wisdom. The Holy Spirit moves in us to behave in a way that might not look like the wisest course of action. We can critique the behavior of these first believers regarding this issue of communal sharing, not the best stewardship. You know, everybody stop selling everything you have. This is not a wise long-term financial plan. And yet, there is a deeper wisdom at work here based on gratitude to God and compassion for those in need. These brothers and sisters are acting out of a conviction stirred up in their hearts based on this deeper wisdom of seeing themselves as one in this community.

And it challenges us to do the same. I do not mean that we should encourage communal ownership of property. I believe the Biblical model of property is best described as stewardship. We own personal property. God allows for the ownership and the increase of wealth. But in our ownership, we are stewards of that wealth, stewards of that property. God is the true owner of all things. We are his stewards. We are not kings in our own right, separate from God. We are his vassals. The community does not have the authority or responsibility to determine how we should use our possessions. We as individuals have that authority and responsibility. But what we have is not simply ours; not if we have bowed our knee to God the Father and Jesus the Son. We give everything over to him. And then he gives it back into our hands, entrusting it to us stewards of what is truly his.

And usually, that stewardship should follow the dictates of Biblical wisdom regarding finances. We are to act wisely. But sometimes that stewardship, like with Mary, calls for something lavish. Or like with these early believers, a lavish generosity. You know, either love for God or love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, love for our fellow men and women, the gratitude and compassion displayed in the first Church is a model for us, even if it is not prescribing to us a required mode for the distribution of property. It is a model of sacrificial giving. It is a model of viewing our possessions as provision from God to serve his purposes. It is a model of compassion for brothers and sisters in need.

Luke has given us this summary about the giving going on in the early Church to show the impact of the Gospel. There was this external threat. It did not shut down the Gospel. They continued to preach the name of Jesus Christ and there was a continued effect in the community. He also gave us this summary to describe the context of a next threat, an internal threat that is going to shock the Christian community. It is the threat of hypocrisy. And it’s not only the hypocrisy that shocks the community, but how swiftly and severely God deals with the hypocrisy kinda leaves the community in fear. This is Acts 4:36-5:16.

### **The Threat of Hypocrisy In the New Covenant Community (4:36-5:11)**

<sup>36</sup> Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), <sup>37</sup> and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. <sup>1</sup> But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, <sup>2</sup> and kept back *some* of the price for himself, with his wife’s full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles’ feet. <sup>3</sup> But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back *some* of the price of the land? <sup>4</sup> “While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart?

You have not lied to men but to God.”<sup>5</sup> And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it.<sup>6</sup> The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.<sup>7</sup> Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.<sup>8</sup> And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.”<sup>9</sup> Then Peter *said* to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out *as well*.”<sup>10</sup> And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.<sup>11</sup> And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.

Following the general description of wealthy believers selling property to care for those in need, we get a specific report about one particular generous and compassionate believer. His name is Joseph. We know him by the nickname, Barnabas, given to him by the Apostles. Luke also tells us that the name means, “son of encouragement”, though scholars are not sure how that’s derived from the word, Barnabas. Son of encouragement - Barnabas. It doesn’t exactly mean that. We are not sure. But that’s okay. It is not always easy to figure out where nicknames come from. But Luke goes on and tells us what the nickname was intended to convey and that is that this guy is the son of encouragement. That’s how they thought of him. And it’s an apt description of what we see in Barnabas, first in his relationship with Paul and then later with Mark.

It is not unusual for Luke to introduce a person briefly in a story and then come back to that person later in the narrative. The first words said about Barnabas are intended to give us the measure of the man, so we will know something about his character when he does show up again later. We’ll be able to think back, “Oh, he was one of those guys who had some wealth, but he gave it for the good of the community. Introducing Barnabas here also sets up a contrast to Ananias and Saphira.

So, we read that Barnabas sold a piece of property and laid the proceeds at the Apostles’ feet. Then we get a contrast, “But...Ananias and Saphira kept some back.” God strikes down both of them. What exactly did they do wrong? Why did they do it? And why did God respond so severely?

*What did they do wrong?*

Starting with what they did wrong, what we know comes from Peter. The Spirit of God gives him discernment into Ananias’ heart attitude.

“Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back *some* of the price of the land? While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.”

Selling land is not compulsory in the early Christian community. Peter says, “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?” These details add to our earlier consideration of common property. Ananias was not required as a Christian to sell this piece of property. Peter also adds, “And after it was sold, was it not under your control?” Ananias did not have to sell and if he did sell, he was not required to give the proceeds to the disciples. It was under his control what he wanted to do with the money.

The charge from Peter is that Ananias kept back part of the proceeds. But if Ananias was not under moral obligation to see his property and if he was not under obligation to give the Apostles the proceeds if he did sell the property, then his sin does not seem to be in simply keeping part of the money from the sell. He was free to decide what part to give. The sin seems to be that he lied about how much he gave. When Saphira comes in the question put to her regards the price. Peter questions, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” She responds, “Yes, that was the price.” Then she dies. The sin was not in holding some money back, but in holding some money back while giving the impression that they were giving the whole to the Apostles. It is the sin of a false testimony. It is the sin of hypocrisy.

*Why did they do it?*

They did it for the same reason we do it. They wanted the honor and praise. They wanted the honor that comes to someone who is sacrificially generous, the honor that comes to someone like Barnabas. They wanted to be seen as more giving than they really are. This is hypocrisy and it is not hard to imagine. It is very human. We get it. You know, we do good and for some reason want to shade what we have done so that it appears even better than it really was. Ironically, there was no need for them to lie. If they sold the land from a true heart for God and gave only half and admitted that they only gave half; they said, "Here's the land, you know, we sold it and we're going to give half to the Church," they would have been recognized as generous and compassionate. Just not maybe as generous and compassionate as Barnabas, sure, but still they would have done what they could do and they would have been seen as good.

I imagine that comparison to Barnabas stirred up a competitive, jealous motivation. So there is both this desire for honor and there is also this jealousy. They did not want to look less giving than Barnabas. You can imagine planning to do something good and noteworthy, and you're going to sacrifice, only to have someone else be even more generous, or more helpful, or more thoughtful, or do better than you. And they get the spotlight while your good deeds feel diminished. Satan uses comparison with other believers - just think Cain and Abel, it's at the beginning - to stir up jealousy and bitterness in our hearts, so that we will act the part of a hypocrite. The word, "hypocrite," comes from the Greek, "theater." It means, "to act or impersonate." That's such a natural tendency of the flesh, to act a little nicer at church than we really are. To dress a little nicer and to say "please" and "thank you" a little more. To cut the sarcasm. To watch our language while we're there. You know, we know we are a bit messed up and struggling with sin, but we don't want them to all know that we are messed up and struggling with sin. We want the honor that comes from being considered better than we really are. In fact, we have even fooled ourselves into thinking that we are better than we really are so we can fool ourselves into thinking that it's an honor that we really deserve. But we are still going to hide a lot of the darkness inside of us and we hope that nobody ever finds out about it. Because, to some degree we are all play-acting.

Comparison to Barnabas leads Ananias to put on a mask. He is play-acting the role of Barnabas, in order to receive the honor that comes to someone like Barnabas.

We get that Ananias' sin was in the lie about how much he gave. And we get that he was motivated by jealousy and the desire for honor. You know, we get these things because our own flesh can relate so easily.

*But why does God respond so severely? That's one of the hardest things to get about this story.*

First, I'd like to point out that it is God, not Peter. The Holy Spirit gives Peter the discernment to see through Ananias and Saphira. When public sin like this is uncovered, church leaders have a tough challenge in determining when and how to address it. You know, how strong do we need to be? God takes the decision for how to respond out of Peter's hands in this case. Peter does not strike Ananias down. Peter calls Ananias out for his lie. God strikes Ananias down. And then God strikes Saphira down. This is the severity of God.

Second, I'd like to point out that this severe response is consistent with the character of the God of the Old Testament. The God of the New Testament is a God of wrath. Look at how much Jesus talks about Hell if you don't think the God of New Testament is a God of wrath. He is a God of wrath just as he is a God of wrath in the Old Testament. And the God of the Old Testament is a God of grace, just as he is a God of grace in the New Testament. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Forget the false narrative that the God of the Old Testament is somehow more severe and less compassionate than the God the New. That is such a non-Biblical idea. God is a God of wrath, and justice, and holiness, and love, and compassion, and grace always.

Third, we know that God does not respond this severely to the vast majority of hypocritical actions by believers. And we know that because you and I are still alive. This is not the normal, or we would



be burned up. This is the problem of Exodus. How does fire exist on a burning bush? How does the holiness of God live with a flammable people? If God responded with death every time a believer sinned, we would all be dead. The cases of severe punishment in the Bible stand out and make an impression on us. But when we add them up, we recognize that there are often hundreds of years between the stories. And nowhere in the Bible is God consistently striking dead disobedient followers one after the other. I mean, even where we see it in the Pentateuch, it's a couple of times in the first generation and a couple of times in the second generation. So it's not happening all the time. It's a rare occurrence. So when God does, apparently he does so for unique reasons that have to do with something in the context. Something is going on.

One of the reasons God responds so severely here seems to have something to do with the birth of the Church. We have already seen comparison between the birth of the Church and the birth of the nation Israel. And that's another place we see the severe punishment of God is back at the birth of Israel in both the first generation out of Egypt and the second generation out of Egypt.

So here Luke repeats the term, "kept back," to describe what Ananias has done with the proceeds. F. F. Bruce points out in his commentary that that this word, "to keep back," is the same word used in the Greek version of Joshua chapter 7 when Achan keeps for himself property that has been placed under a ban by God. The second generation had overcome the disobedience of the first generation out of Egypt and had just entered the Promised land. They've experienced this victory over their enemies by the power of God. It's not really them but God is doing it. But then one of the men, this Achan, keeps property for himself that God has said, "Don't keep!" And he lies about it. And God strikes Achan and his family down.

It's a similar situation at the beginning of Israel that we have at the beginning of the Church. Those early days in the life of Israel were critical moments. And in a few cases, in a few rare cases, God punished swiftly to keep his people from immediately turning aside from him. God is not play acting with his people. God is serious about Israel. And God is serious about the Church. These early days in Jerusalem are critical. And eventually hypocrisy will become a serious problem throughout the Church. It is today. It's all over. But not yet. We are right here at the beginning. We don't yet have Paul converted. We don't yet have the New Testament formed. These are early days, and they are important days, and God is protecting his people from hypocritical influencers, so that the Church will not be derailed right from the start.

It is tough to prove that God is protecting the Church because if he is, he did so successfully, leaving us to only wonder what the consequences might have been if he did not remove Ananias and Saphira. What might have happened? What damage could they have done?

And just a little bit of imagination can help us at this point. The comparison here is made to Barnabas. Barnabas is the man who is going to be chosen to oversee the new church plant that the Apostles hear about going on up in Antioch. Barnabas is going to go to Antioch and while he's there doing ministry he is going to think of Paul, who has been sidelined after his conversion because the establishment became so intent on killing him that the Apostles sent him up to Tarsus. And Barnabas thinks about how much good would result if a man like Paul came and worked with me Antioch? So, Barnabas - son of encouragement - goes to Tarsus in search of Paul and persuades him to come to Antioch, and the rest is history.

But what if Barnabas was not the one chosen by the Apostles to go to Antioch? What if Ananias and Saphira had succeeded in their deception? What if they had received the honor of Barnabas and had become trusted leaders in the New Covenant community? What if the Apostles choose a husband and wife team to go to Antioch? Does a man like Ananias, you know, he is being looked up to by the believers in Antioch - "Oh, you're the one the Apostles, you're so great, you're helping us," - does he ever go get a more famous man than himself like Paul, who he's never really going to compare to, does he go and get a better teacher like Paul to come and share in the ministry of Antioch? No. He never goes and gets Paul.

And if not, what about the later missionary journeys of Paul? What about all his New Testament letters? What about Luke, the traveling companion of Paul? What about the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts we are reading right now? It doesn't exist if Barnabas doesn't go and get Paul.

Now, this is all hypothetical. I am using my imagination. I am not saying that the Apostles would have sent Ananias to Antioch. I am only pointing out that we do not know what God was protecting the early Church from when he removed Ananias and Saphira. Hypocritical leaders can corrupt a movement. They can be the death of a movement. You've seen it happen. God protects the early Christian movement swiftly and decisively with severe justice and I think God deserves our trust in this. God knew what he was doing. It's hard but God had good reason for it being hard.

Luke tells us that because of the deaths of Ananias and Saphira, "a great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things." And this is not communicated as a negative. There is a right, holy fear in our relationship with God. Isaiah felt it when he saw the glory of God in his vision, crying out, "I am undone!" And Peter felt it in the boat when Jesus calmed the winds and the waves, "Away from me Lord, I am a sinful man." The early Christian movement feels in this moment a holy, sobering fear.

God is serious about the Church. The Church is his plan of salvation in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, to the remotest parts of the earth. The Church is his plan for displaying the glory of his grace and his justice and his goodness through the ages. The awakening in Jerusalem began with joy, great joy. But the joy cannot exist apart from suffering, not while humanity is still broken, and the nations rage against God. Every local body of Christ will continue to face external threats and internal threats. Responding to the external threat by the Jerusalem establishment, the believers prayed, and God solidified their resolve and the movement continued to grow. In response to this internal threat of hypocrisy, God stepped in to cut the cancer out. A holy fear falls over the people. What happens next? Does the mission stop? Are the believers afraid to go on? We conclude with Acts 5:12-16.

### Conclusion (5:12-16)

<sup>12</sup> At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. <sup>13</sup> But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. <sup>14</sup> And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to *their number*, <sup>15</sup> to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. <sup>16</sup> Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.

This threat has not derailed the people of God, the work of God. The awakening continues.

### Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 4:32-35. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Would you be one of the one's with property or goods to sell for the benefit of others or would you more likely be one to receive help from the community? What emotions arise in you when you think about putting communal sharing of property into practice? Does the idea of communal sharing of property frighten you or threaten you? Or does the idea excite you?
3. Does the difference between descriptive narrative and prescriptive narrative seem valid to you?
4. Consider the method of interpretation used in this lesson by observing the text, the immediate context, the whole of Acts, and the New Testament epistles. Does the method seem to be a sound method of interpretation? Do you agree with the conclusions at each stage of interpretation or do you see a mistake or weakness in the interpretation?

5. What are your own conclusion about sharing resources with the Christian community? What principles seem to not apply in all cases and what principles seem to apply in all cases? What do you believe God is calling you to do?
6. Read Acts 4:36-5:11. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
7. How do you resolve in your own mind the harshness of God's punishment of Ananias and Saphira? Does it help to recognize that God is a God of grace and justice in both the Old Testament and the New Testament?
8. Read Acts 5:12-16. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
9. Does the story of Ananias and Saphira motivate you towards integrity and holiness? How do you understand or explain the fear of the Lord as a positive aspect of your Christian experience?