

February 25, 2024

The Acts of the Apostles
VII. Ananias and Sapphira
Acts 4:32 – 5:11

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Presbyterian pastor Eugene Peterson once told a story about a grizzly attack that happened not far from where he lived in Montana. The young man who was attacked had driven out from North Carolina to hike what he had heard were some of the most wild and beautiful trails in the U.S. Interviewed later from his hospital bed, he emphatically stated, “*I’m never coming back to this place!*” He apparently had not considered that wild and beautiful might also mean isolated and dangerous.

A week after the grizzly attack, Peterson and his wife, along with their son and daughter-in-law and another couple, went hiking on the same trail where the grizzly attack had occurred. Only Peterson was aware of that fact, but there was a sign posted at the trailhead: “*Danger: Grizzly activity on this trail. Hike at your own risk.*” A couple of hours down the trail, they reached their destination – a gem-like, glacier-fed lake. Peterson wrote:

We stood at the lakeshore admiring the five waterfalls cascading off the mountain face, listened to and watched a couple of varied thrushes sing and eat bugs. Holy ground. And then I noticed a movement a hundred or so yards up the lakeshore. I took aim with my binoculars: a grizzly and her cub, playfully splashing in the water. I passed the binoculars around; we all had a good look. And then Amy, our daughter-in-law, who was five months pregnant and therefore especially aware of the fragility and preciousness of life, said, “I want to get out of here.” And we did get out. Holy ground, but dangerous ground.¹

For Peterson, those grizzly encounters illustrated something of what it means to be in relationship with the living God – something which we forget only at our great peril. Namely that our God is a holy God – and that the holiness of God is something we must never trifle with. Holy ground, but dangerous ground. God is not our peer, our buddy, our co-pilot, or our friend. He is God. And in the presence of this God we dare not grow too comfortable, too complacent, too relaxed. In fact, as the Bible indicates time and again, when we are met face to face by the living God, the only reasonable response is to fall upon our knees in fear and trembling. Our God is a loving God, a redeeming God, a merciful God, a just God. But our God is also a holy God. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it: “*Our God is a consuming fire*” – and playing with fire can be a dangerous pursuit.²

And that, I believe, is the first and most important truth this strange and frightening story of Ananias and Sapphira has to tell us. And it is, to us, indeed a strange and frightening story. For one thing – to us – the punishment doesn't seem to fit the crime. Yes, Ananias and Sapphira shouldn't have held back some of the proceeds from the sale – they should have had the courage of Barnabas who laid all of the proceeds of his sale at the apostles' feet. And, yes, Ananias and Sapphira certainly shouldn't have lied to Peter about what they had done. But death? I mean, maybe they died of heart attacks rather than the direct action of God – but still. But, you know what, it's that very judgment on our part that this is unfair which shows why we so need this reminder of the holiness of our God. This very presumption on our part that we have the right to judge the actions of God. We need this reminder, as another verse in Hebrews puts it, that *“it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God.”*³

We get too comfortable with God, you and me. We readily become complacent about Him, before Him, in all matters concerning Him. We start taking Him for granted – becoming indifferent to our duties of worship and obedience and reverence before Him. We domesticate Him, tame Him, reduce Him down to the size of our thoughts and our ways – despite His warning to us through Isaiah that His thoughts are not the same as our thoughts, His ways not the same as our ways.⁴ And even worse, we begin to just assume Him, presume upon Him. We assume that His job is to be a useful accessory to our lives, to our dreams and schemes – that He exists to serve our desires. And we presume upon His mercy – believing that He doesn't really mind it all that much when we go against His will and do what we shouldn't do, fail to do what we should do. Like King Herod in W. H. Auden's Christmas Oratorio: *“I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged.”*⁵

And that is why we **need** a passage like this – a passage that brings us up short and shakes us up, in order to remind us just who it is we are actually dealing with when we speak of God. To remind us that He is not at all as manageable as we conceive, not at all as complacent as we desire, not at all as safe to have on our hands as we assume. To remind us that it is not His job to conform to our expectations of Him, but rather our job to conform our lives to His expectations of us. To remind us that His chief job is not to make our lives easier according to our desires, but rather our chief job is to glorify Him, that we might enjoy Him forever. We forget that God is God, and so we need this reminder, this wakeup call – lest we, like Ananias and Sapphira, should make light of the holiness of God, forget the greatness and glory of the One who has made not only us, but the heavens and the earth besides.

Again, I can't say I understand everything about the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. But I find it perfectly plain what the message of their death is meant to be to us – the very same message that the church in Acts took from their deaths, right there in the last verse: *“And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.”* Great fear, reverent fear, holy fear – that sort of fear of the Lord, the Bible says, which is the beginning of wisdom. That our God is a consuming fear. That it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God.

But there is more here even than that – though that alone were certainly enough. It's not just a warning to let God be God, and not what we would reduce Him to. It is also a warning, a reminder, that we are also not to presume upon the gift of His grace. A reminder that grace entails

discipleship in response. And that discipleship means bearing a cross for Jesus – dying to self, dying to the ways of the world and the approval of the world, in order to more closely follow the One who is our Lord, as well as our Savior.⁶ We're all at least a bit like Ananias and Sapphira – giving God some of our loyalty, some of our priority attention, some of our obedience, some of our interest, time, talent, and treasure. But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it in his Christian classic, The Cost of Discipleship – and as our story of Ananias and Sapphira puts it even more strongly – “*Discipleship can tolerate no conditions which might come between Jesus and our obedience to Him.*”⁷ Bonhoeffer then continues that thought:

*The cross is laid on every Christian. It begins with the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with His death – we give over our lives to death . . . When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.*⁸

We need this warning of Ananias and Sapphira simply because that is not what we want to hear, and especially not what we want to do when we come to Christ. We need this reminder of Ananias and Sapphira so that we do not become complacent before Christ, complacent towards what He is calling us to be and to become as His disciples, as those who have received His grace. Because it is so easy for us to want religion, but not too much. To want to be saved, but not to be changed. To serve Christ, but not to the point of inconveniencing our pursuit of pleasure and our own schemes for security. For isn't that why Ananias and Sapphira held back that money from the sale – so that they wouldn't be too inconvenienced in their pursuit of pleasure, and not to be too compromised on what they felt made for their “real” security in this world? Money?

Reed Arvin, a novelist and Christian music producer and artist, gave an address some years ago at Calvin College which goes right to the heart of our complacency about discipleship. This is what he said:

*There are a lot of flavors of American Christianity. One, by far the largest, is the group whose lifestyle is more or less indistinguishable from the mainstream. The words and creeds used by this group are occasionally distinctive, but what they “know” and what they “believe” are very different. They “know” that Jesus calls us to a radically free, radically lived life in service to God and each other; but they “believe” in amassing as much ‘stuff’ as possible, having as much ‘pleasure’ as possible, and generally behaving just like everybody else. They go to the same movies and spend their time and their money in more or less identical ways to the culture at large. They are laissez-faire Christians – live and let live. The reality of Jesus doesn't animate their lives or what they consume or what they create . . .*⁹

And because that is so – and we know that it is so, we know to what extent it is so even in our discipleship – because that is so, we need this warning, this reminder that, indeed, “*When Christ*

calls a person, He bids him or her to come and die."¹⁰ Take up a cross, die to what we have been – and begin to follow Him in earnest, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. That also explains why the whole church fell into great fear at the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira – because it was a warning that God expects, that God will accept nothing less than all our loyalty, our number one priority, all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

But, lest we despair: there is one more thing to say about this strange and frightening story. We haven't paid much attention yet to how our passage begins, to that account of the early church as a place of concord and mutual care, focused upon the grace of our Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit. That picture of all being cared for, no one going without. That picture of Barnabas literally acting out Jesus' parable about the treasure found in a field. Barnabas, having found the treasure of Jesus, selling everything gladly, that he might then be possessed by Jesus wholly, and enter into the embrace of his new brothers and sisters in Christ.¹¹ Here's how I read it: that this lovely picture of the early church, followed then by this strange and terrible story of Ananias and Sapphira, really do belong together. That while the second story warns us, the first is meant to invite us – to show us what awaits those who give all to Jesus. In other words, I think even the warning of the Ananias and Sapphira story is, in the end, a gift of God's grace – not of His anger, but of His love for us. In that He warns us through Ananias and Sapphira so that we won't miss out on the joy, on the genuine security, on the peace that truly can be ours when we give ourselves, like Barnabas, fully to Christ.

Which reminds me of a wonderful story on just this theme from C. S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia. We started with a grizzly bear – so let's end with a great and fearsome lion. Some of you will remember this scene – it's a powerful one. One of the children in the Chronicles, a rather haughty young girl named Jill Pole, finds herself alone, walking through a forest. And there, by a stream, she has an encounter with Aslan, the Great Lion, the Christ-figure of Lewis' stories. Aslan is there between her and the stream. As she stands there, terrified, Aslan speaks, "*If you are thirsty, you may drink.*"

"I am dying of thirst," said Jill.

"Then drink," said the Lion.

"May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?"
said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And just as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.

The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her near frantic.

"Will you promise not to – do anything to me, if I come?"

"I make no promise," said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

"Do you eat girls?" she said.

"I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion. It didn't say this as

if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

“I daren’t come and drink,” said Jill.

“Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion.

“Oh dear!” said Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”

“There is no other stream,” said the Lion.

It never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the Lion – no one who had seen his stern face could do that – and her mind suddenly made itself up. It was the worst thing she had ever had to do, but she went forward to the stream, knelt down, and began scooping up water in her hand. It was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted.¹²

There is still so much about this strange and frightening story of Ananias and Sapphira that I don’t understand, cannot explain. But, in the end, I think it serves not just as a warning, but as an invitation from Christ to enter in, fully enter into, not to miss out on that living stream of abundant and eternal life¹³ – in which we are blessed, made new, and truly and forever satisfied by the gifts of His grace, mercy, peace, and power. Or, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it in The Cost of Discipleship:

Happy are the . . . followers of Jesus Christ who have been overcome by His grace, and are able to sing the praises of the all-sufficient grace of Christ with humbleness of heart. Happy are they who, knowing that grace, can live in the world without being of it, who, by following Jesus Christ, are so assured of their heavenly citizenship that they are truly free to live their lives in this world. Happy are they who know that discipleship simply means the life which springs from grace, and that grace simply means discipleship. Happy are they who have become Christians in this sense of the word. For them the word of grace has proved a fount of mercy.¹⁴

Our God is a consuming fire. And it is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God – just ask Ananias and Sapphira. But it is only in those hands, only when we surrender ourselves to that holy flame, that we find life, and that abundantly.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, The Jesus Way (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p.131.

² Hebrews 12:29.

³ Hebrews 10:31.

⁴ Isaiah 55:8-9.

⁵ W. H. Auden, For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio, “The Massacre of the Innocents”, Scene 1; accessed online at [For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio Wylan Hugh Auden.pdf \(ctk.org\)](http://www.wystan.org.uk/for-the-time-being-a-christmas-oratorio-wystan-hugh-auden.pdf).

⁶ Matthew 16:24-26.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1956), p. 54.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, p. 73.

⁹ From a speech by Reed Arvin entitled, “Romeo Must Die,” delivered at the 2002 Calvin College Conference on Writing. Mr. Arvin was kind enough to send me a copy of his speech.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, p. 73.

¹¹ Matthew 13:44.

¹² C. S. Lewis, The Silver Chair (Book 4 of The Chronicles of Narnia) New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 16-18.

¹³ John 4:13-14.

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, p. 49.