

O Church Arise: Through the Book of Acts

The Church Militant (Acts 5:1-6:7)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on May 3, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ The headlines in the news lately have been grim. Two Sundays ago, the Islamic State issued new threats against all Christians through a video warning that under their caliphate you have three choices: convert to Islam, pay a special tax (which most in that region could never afford), or die. Then they showed footage of two groups of men identified as Christians being slaughtered. One group by gunshot. The other by beheading. This was two weeks ago. Not a century ago. Not something from the ancient past.

- ❖ The threat of this kind of persecution feels so foreign and primeval. It's hard to believe this stuff still happens. **I think we should be thankful that God has spared us from such atrocities.** But know that it's owing solely to his sovereign mercy and not because we're more deserving of safety and protection.
 - ▶ **We should also open our eyes and acknowledge the pure evil that's behind these killings.** The violence of the Islamic State is not explainable by politics or economics. But by theology. The reality is that a battle has been waging for two millennia. There is such thing as spiritual warfare. **Lurking behind the motivation to kill anyone who claims the name of Christ Jesus is actually an ancient foe.**

- ❖ As we continue our study through the book of Acts, I want to expose this enemy and his wicked schemes. In chapters 4-7 the church gets hit hard by persecution, by suffering, by oppression. There are a lot of threats made against them and a few carried out. It's bad.
 - ▶ And even though Luke's accounting of these events are focused on the actions of human actors, **we begin to see that, behind the scenes, darker forces are at work.** Satan almost goes unnamed throughout chapters 4-7, but there's this one place in chapter 5 where the curtain is slightly lifted and we get a glimpse of him.
 - Peter says in v3, "*Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit*". That right there is a peek behind the veil. **That's a glimpse of the warfare waging between the principal actors, Satan and the Holy Spirit.**

- ❖ *Church, do you realize that we're still caught up in a conflict that, at its heart, is spiritual in nature?* I want to teach you a new term. It's called the Church Militant. In Christian theology, it distinguishes the Universal Church into two groups. First, you have the **Church Militant**, which comprises all the living believers on earth today. And then there's the **Church Triumphant** referring to all other Christians who have already died to be with Christ.
 - ▶ They're the Church at rest. **But for us, we're the Church at war.** We're in a battle of sorts. The American Church may be spared at this moment from physical violence. But we're already being marginalized in our ever-secularizing society and pressured to compromise our deeply-held convictions. We're being mistreated and misunderstood.
 - That's why it's helpful to take a look behind the curtain and recognize the spiritual warfare. Because it changes our tone and our target. **We go from being triumphal to humble once we realize our strength is insufficient.**

- ❖ **Our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places** (Eph. 6:12). Our enemies are not in Washington. They're not in Hollywood or the mainstream media. They're not among the cultural elite. And they're not even among the religious extremists who mean us violence and harm.
 - ▶ Our enemies are spiritual. **The greatest of them is known as the Deceiver.** And one of his greatest deceptions is to trick us into thinking our enemies are fellow creatures made in the image of God. When in reality he's the one to contend with. This is why it's helpful to continue pulling back that curtain to recognize the devil's strategy.
 - In our passage we learn that the devil tends to attack God's church from three directions/fronts. He tries to **1) Corrupt the church by falsehood from within** (5:1-11). **2) Suppress the church by force from without** (5:12-42). If those fails, he'll **3) Distract the church by preoccupying their shepherds** (6:1-7).

Corrupting the Church

- ❖ Let's consider the first battle front and see how **Satan tries to corrupt the church by falsehood from within.** Chapter 5:1-11 are some of the most difficult verses in Scripture. Not difficult in terms of understanding but in terms of accepting. Difficult passages like this don't get any easier just by studying Scripture more. They get easier by submitting to Scripture more.
 - ▶ I mean approaching the Bible with a degree of humility. If there really is a God who made the heavens and the earth and all therein, is it really reasonable to expect this God to perfectly meet all of your expectations, to operate exactly as you see fit, to thoroughly share your values and sensibilities?
 - **Isn't it more reasonable to expect to be surprised every so often by this Holy and Almighty God?** To expect to find passages where he conducts himself in a way that surprises or confuses you? I think it's reasonable to expect a difficult passage like ours. **One where we're confronted with a God who strikes down sinners dead on the spot.** Talk about difficult.
- ❖ If this were the OT, you might not be as shocked because you come to expect that from that half of the Bible. But here we have God exacting divine punishment, killing sinners on the spot, *in the NT!* That leaves us with some pretty difficult questions. I can think of three in particular: **a) What did Ananias and Sapphira do that was so wrong? b) Why did they have to immediately die? c) Can the same thing happen in our church today?**
- ❖ First, what was their sin? ***What did they do that was so wrong?*** It's not a straightforward answer. There are layers here. **On one level, you could argue that their sin was the love of money.** In vv1-2, we learn that this couple sells a piece of property. Their plan is to give the proceeds to the church. But they're looking at all this cash in hand, and suddenly they can't bear the thought of giving it all away. So they hold some of it back.
 - ▶ **They felt compelled to hold onto their money because money had a hold on them.** The Bible warns that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). In other words, it leads you to do pretty foolish and wicked things.

- ❖ So the love of money was a driving motivation for Ananias and Sapphira, but **on another level you could blame it on a love of man's praise**. They wanted to look more generous than they really were. They wanted everyone to think of them like they thought of Barnabas, who had sold some property and brought all the proceeds to the apostle's feet (4:37). They likely saw the church's response to Barnabas's generosity and wanted the same attention. So not only did Ananias and Sapphira love money, they loved the praise and approval of others.
- ❖ But there's more. Based on Peter's analysis in vv3-4 it appears that **their main problem was not the holding back of money but the holding back of truth**. Look at v3, "*But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?'*"
 - ▶ That word for "keep back" literally means to misappropriate. It's used in Joshua 7:1 (LXX) to describe the sin of Achan. Do you remember **Achan**? He's the one who lied to Joshua and retained some of the spoils of war though knowing all of it had been devoted to the LORD. He was misappropriating funds. He was stealing from God!
- ❖ Peter explains in v4 that Ananias was under no obligation to give the full proceeds. He didn't even have to sell his property or donate *any* proceeds. If he had just explained they overreached and were unable to keep their initial pledge, I'm certain this story would've ended differently.
 - ▶ But he lied. Not just to the church but to God. Truth matters. **If he had only told the truth, this would've been a case of an unfulfilled pledge**. It would've been a lesson on not making rash vows. But because he kept back the truth (he lied to God and man), everything gets elevated. Now it becomes a case of theft, deception, and hypocrisy.
 - Listen, we often convince ourselves that the truth will only complicate things. It'll only make matters worse. Learn from Ananias's folly. The truth sets you free. **Holding it back will only elevate your problems and the consequences**. Telling the truth can completely change the way your story ends.
- ❖ Do you see what Satan is trying to do here? He'll readily persecute the church, as we'll see next. But he knows he's can do far more damage if he can bring us down from within through corruption, through falsehood and hypocrisy. **He knows if he can keep us gripped by the love of money and approval, then, just like this couple, our love for truth with quickly dissolve into falsehood and fraud**. He'll make hypocrites of us.
 - ▶ Let's be clear: The greater danger to the American Church is not the legalization of same-sex marriage. It's not the curtailing of religious freedoms, the secularization of our campuses, or the materialism of our culture. **The greater danger is our hypocrisy**. Our discrediting of a Christian witness. What's worse, our discrediting of God himself.
- ❖ Later on in v9 in confronting Sapphira, Peter accuses them of agreeing together to test the Spirit of the Lord. **They were testing God. Implicit in their deception and hypocrisy was the assumption that God would do nothing about it**.

- ❖ That's exactly what we do when we remain in our hypocrisy. When we try to pass ourselves off as more godly, more generous than we really are. We're testing God! We're challenging him.
 - ▶ *Is he really present in this church? Does he really see all things? Is he really holy? Does he really have the nerve to punish our sins, or is he just going to turn a blind eye?* Jesus taught us not to put God to the test (Matt 4:7). There are consequences. And in this instance, Ananias and Sapphira died on the spot.

- ❖ **That leads us to wonder why they had to immediately die. *Why weren't they given a chance to repent and seek forgiveness?*** First of all, keep in mind that God has put up with far worse than this couple. We're told in Romans 3:25 that in his divine forbearance, God has mercifully passed over far worse sins than this. So on one hand, it's true they didn't have to die. There is no hard fast rule that says those who lie in church must be struck down.

- ❖ **There are a lot of explanations given for why, in this instance, these two sinners were not called to repentance but immediately received divine chastisement.** Those who argue that they were **false believers** suggest that the church was so young and at such a pivotal stage that they couldn't bear such open deception. To forebear this sin would sow distrust and disunity into an already fragile community being subjected to greater oppression from without.
 - ▶ Others who argue that they were **genuine believers** suggest that God was just being merciful and calling them home before they go on to sin further and disrupt the unity of this fledging church. Honestly, there's not enough here to confidently say whether or not Ananias and Sapphira were true believers.

- ❖ But in the end, what really matters is this: If we took seriously the Bible's teaching on the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin, the question we'd be asking is not why weren't Ananias and Sapphira given a chance to repent. **The real question is why are you and I given that chance every single hour.** We can be just as hypocritical or worse. So why do we get to lie to God, to lie to the church, to lie to ourselves and still get to live to see another day?

- ❖ **Friends, *that should be the most difficult question you have about this passage.*** Is that what you find so hard about these verses? **Or have you presumed upon God's grace?** It's so convicting when I realize that my first instinct is to wonder why don't they get more time to repent. As if they deserve it. As if I deserve it. It goes to show how much I presume upon God's gracious gifts – like repentance (cf. 5:31) – and treat his gifts like something he owes me.
 - ▶ The only thing sinners like Ananias and Sapphira, like us – the only thing that God owes us is death. That's the wages of our sin (Rom. 6:23). The fact that his Son died on the cross to bear those wages for us is pure gift. The fact that he gives us chance after chance to repent of our falsehood and hypocrisy is pure gift. Don't take it for granted.

- ❖ That of course leads to the question of whether the same thing can happen in our church today. **Can or does God strike down people today, even those in the Church?** The difficult answer is yes. I know that makes us uneasy.

- ▶ But let me clarify. None of us are in the position to authoritatively declare a particular sickness or tragedy or death as a direct act of divine punishment. We should be weary of making such claims and very weary of those who make them.
- ❖ But with that qualification in place, there is scriptural warrant to suggest that in some cases sickness or death are direct consequences of our sin. How else do you understand Paul in **1 Corinthians 11**? There he's speaking to believers about their misconduct when taking the Lord's Supper. *"²⁹For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died."*
 - ▶ We know that those who turn to Christ in repentance and faith will be forgiven and no longer face eternal consequences (spiritual death), but who can deny that sin has earthly consequences? And supposing Ananias and Sapphira to be genuine believers, who can deny that God disciplines his children for their good (Heb. 12:10)?
- ❖ As a church we often pray for revival. **We pray for the Holy Spirit to come in power, to fill our churches. But maybe we should take a moment to ask if that's what we really want.** Because when the Spirit comes with power, he comes with holiness. So if you're not prepared to repent of your hypocrisy and to live in his holiness, then you actually wouldn't want God's Spirit to come in power and fill this place.
 - ▶ In the church where the Spirit was poured out, where the lame walked, where the sick were healed, where signs and wonders were performed – liars and hypocrites were struck down dead.
- ❖ Some of you are thinking, "That's scary. I don't want anything to do with that." Apparently that's how some in Jerusalem felt. Look at v13. *"¹³None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem."* Yet even more were still drawn to this community. *"¹⁴And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women."*
 - ▶ The question is which are you? Do you feel threatened by this picture of the church or does it draw you further in? Do you want to be part of a community where hypocrisy characterizes us or holiness? The Spirit has created the latter and intends to preserve it.

Suppressing the Church

- ❖ You can be sure the Deceiver will always try to corrupt the church by falsehood but the Spirit of Truth will always prevail through conviction and correction. This is why Satan tends to coordinate his internal attack by coming at us externally from a second battle front. As we've already seen in chapter 4, now starting in v17 we see **Satan's attempt to suppress the church by force from without.**
 - ▶ Again it comes from the religious leaders of Jerusalem. *"¹⁷But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy ¹⁸they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. ¹⁹But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ²⁰"Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." ²¹And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach."*

- ❖ So as we saw in chapter 4, the members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council, were greatly annoyed and filled with jealousy towards the apostles. They already arrested them once before and now they do it again.
 - ▶ But then we read of a miraculous jailbreak orchestrated by angels. And the apostles are commanded to immediately go back out, stand out in the open in the temple and preach the words of Life. Don't lose your voice. Don't be silent. Speak the words of God.

- ❖ Then we read a rather comedic few verses as the leaders and the temple guards are confused trying to piece together what happened. Finally in v27, they arrest the apostles once more and the high priest says in v28, *"We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us."* ²⁹*But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."*
 - ▶ In v33 we read that "they were enraged and wanted to kill them." But a well-respected Pharisee on the council named Gamaliel spoke up and recommended a more moderate course of action. He reminded his fellow council members that cult leaders have risen and fallen before their eyes. **If this Jesus is just one of many, then his following will die out soon enough like all the rest.**

- ❖ But he goes on to say in v39 if Jesus is different, *"if [this movement] is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"* So they took his advice, ⁴⁰*and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.* ⁴¹*Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.* ⁴²*And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus."* Read on into the beginning of 6:1, *"Now in the days when the disciples were increasing in number."*
 - ▶ So the church is suppressed by force from without. It's threatened not to teach and preach in the name of Jesus. And that results in more teaching and more preaching and more and more disciples increasing in number. Isn't that amazing? Persecution doesn't halt gospel growth or church growth. **Persecution is like a spark that purifies the church and ignites it on fire for the growth of the gospel.**

- ❖ Just look at the **church in China**. Most of you are aware that for decades external force and threats have been used to eradicate the church or at least to halt its growth. But it led to the exact opposite effect. Most experts say now that there are probably more Christians in China than there are members of the 87-million strong communist party.
 - ▶ But over the past decade or so we've seen greater tolerance shown towards churches in China. Great freedoms. In many cities, unregistered churches operate in the open and have an average Sunday attendance larger than ours. It's gotten to the point that "underground church" has become a misnomer for many of these congregations.

- ❖ There was an article in the *Economist* last November that looked at the state of the church in China.¹ It talked about the increasing religious freedom that churches are enjoying. But it ended with a warning. **It said there is this paradox happening where if religious freedom really takes hold in China, it might harm the church in two ways.** *"The church might become institutionalized, wealthy and hence corrupt Alternatively the church, long strengthened by repression, may become a feebler part of society in a climate of toleration. As one Beijing house-church elder declared, with a nod to the erosion of Christian faith in western Europe: "If we get full religious freedom, then the church is finished."*
- ❖ Just let that sink in. If we get full religious freedom, the church is finished. Remember that when the next headline comes in telling of a new threat to religious liberty. Look, I am concerned over the pressure we're facing to conform to the patterns and priorities of this world. I don't take religious liberty issues lightly. I would love for liberties to be preserved and respected. But they're not a necessity.
 - ▶ **The advance of the kingdom and the mission of the church are not dependent on the privilege of religious freedom.** In fact, not having as much freedom and having more repression could actually be a good thing for the American Church.
- ❖ I'm no prophet but I wouldn't be surprised if our churches continue to decline as it becomes socially unacceptable to be a Christian who holds to biblical truth and ethics. But after a season of decline, a season of suppression by cultural (spiritual) forces, we're going to witness an explosive growth of a purer church refined by persecution and sanctified by the Spirit.

Distracting the Church

- ❖ Now if corrupting the church or suppressing the church doesn't work, Satan has one more scheme up his sleeve. **He'll distract the church by preoccupying their shepherds (6:1-7) with a lot of good things**, a lot of good ministries, a lot of busyness. **And what ends up getting neglected is the two things he fears most: prayer and the ministry of the Word.**
 - ▶ This just goes to show how shrewd the devil can be. If I can't bring you down by evil within or evil without, then I'll do it by keep you busy and preoccupied with good things so you don't have time for the best things, for the most important things.
- ❖ Notice back in chapter 6:1 there's mention of a controversy that started brewing between two groups within the church, the Hellenists (Grecian Jewish Christians) and the Hebrews (Hebraic Jewish Christians). The widows among the Hellenists were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.
 - ▶ **Some have pointed out the cultural tensions that existed between these two groups.** They were both followers of Christ, both of Jewish ethnicity, but worlds apart when it came to culture. I get it. Immigrant churches like ours with co-existing congregations of first and second generation Christians are well-suited to understand the tensions that perhaps contributed to this issue in the early church.

¹ See online: <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21629218-rapid-spread-christianity-forcing-official-rethink-religion-cracks>

- ❖ Others have suggested that we're jumping to conclusions to assume the oversight was due to prejudice or preferential treatment. **They say it was just due to poor administration resulting from the explosive growth of the church.** So many ministry needs hit them so fast.
 - ▶ I wouldn't be surprised if cultural tension and poor administration both shared blame. Regardless, the apostles turned to the church for a solution. *"²And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."*

- ❖ Don't misinterpret the apostles as suggesting that the ministry of the word is more important than the ministry of service. They're not saying that diaconal work is inferior to pastoral work. This is not an issue of whose ministry is more important. **This is an issue of calling – being faithful to the ministry calling and responsibilities that God has apportioned to each.**
 - ▶ The apostles and the elders/pastors who followed are called to shepherd the flock equipping them to feed on the Word and encouraging them to drink deeply of the Spirit. **Their ministry is aimed primarily at meeting spiritual needs in the church.**

- ❖ Now deacons, on the other hand, are equally spiritual leaders in the church. Notice they're not chosen on the basis of their professional skills ("*He's really good with numbers.*") or their social skills ("*She knows lots of people. She'd represent that congregation well.*").
 - ▶ No, the deacons of the church need to be spiritual leaders of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom. **But distinct from the apostles/elders, their ministry is aimed primary at meeting physical or financial needs among the body.**

- ❖ And notice how by meeting physical needs in the church, the deacons were able to maintain and strengthen the spiritual unity of the church, which was threatened by this controversy. And of course the deacons were greatly serving the shepherds of the church – giving them the gift of more time and attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.
 - ▶ What was the result? Look at v7. *"And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."*

- ❖ Church, let's apply this text this week by praying for our deacons. You probably never thought of it this way, but **a way to get in the fight, to engage in this spiritual warfare waging about us, is to pray for your deacons.**
 - ▶ The devil would love nothing better than to bog down the elders and pastors of this church with so much to do that we end up neglecting prayer and the preaching and teaching of the Word.
 - So pray for our current deacons and their ministry and pray for more deacons. Pray for a strong and healthy diaconate ministry in this church. That the word of God might continue to increase among us to the point that one day soon we too will be accused of filling our city with our teaching about Christ (5:28).