A church that fears God

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[0:00] Let us turn now to the part of God's word that we read in the book of Acts, chapter 5. Now I'd like us to centre our thoughts around words that we have in verse 11 of Acts, chapter 5, where we read, And great fear came upon all the church.

Great fear came upon all the church. We read a little bit earlier in our service the story of Ananias and Sapphira.
I imagine that all of us have heard that story before. And I would be surprised if there are any of us here this morning who find that story an easy story to listen to.
I would be surprised even if there are those of us who have heard the story often and find it now easy to our ears.
I don't think it's a story that ever comes easily to the ears of any one of us. But although the story is a problem to us, there is absolutely no evidence that it is a problem to the Holy Spirit who breathed out the record of that story that we have in the scriptures.
[1:30] It appears just in the same sort of way as all the other stories of the book of Acts appears. It follows on in the chronological order of the book, perfectly naturally.

There is no special reason given for the story. There is no aside to help us with the difficulty that we might feel. The Holy Spirit seems to have no problem as he records it as a matter of fact in the same sort of way as he records other facts that are there for us in the book of Acts.
And I think that our text this morning, Great Fear Came Upon All the Church, gives us the reason, at least the main reason, why the Holy Spirit has included the facts concerning Ananias and Sapphira in the story of the book of Acts.
You see, we've been finding out already in our study of this booklet that it's a booklet is telling us the story of the church of Jesus Christ. It's telling us about the kingdom of Jesus and how it has been built up and established in this world.
And the Holy Spirit wants us to know that this church, that is the church of Jesus Christ, this church, not any denomination or any particular congregation, that the company of born-again believing people, the company of followers of Jesus Christ, the Saviour, that church is a company of people who fear the Lord.
[3:26] And so here is a historical incident at the beginnings of this church that the Holy Spirit can use to illustrate this important truth.

that the people of God have always and will always have to learn to fear the Lord. And so I think that we can use the story in that way this morning and ask some questions of the story and ask really one question particularly, what is it that produces the fear of the Lord in the people of God in the church of Jesus Christ?
Well, the things that happened in this story that brought this effect, that great fear came upon all the church, the things that happened in the story, these are the things that bring the fear of the Lord into his church.
One or two things. First of all, sin is exposed. This is something that God does amongst his people to bring his fear into their lives.
He exposes sin, especially sin that might otherwise be hidden. You see, at this very early stage, the need for discipline in Christ's church is brought to a head by this story.
[5:12] This is one of the great reasons why this story has been included in the book of Acts, because it teaches about the need for discipline in the church of Christ. Christ. There is to be a clear difference between those who belong to Christ's church and those who do not belong to Christ's church.

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Our usage of the word converted and unconverted is very helpful in this connection, and I think it's glued that in our tradition it's a very popular terminology for us to use to divide between the people of God and those who are not the people of God.
It may bring difficulties for some that we have to deal with very tenderly, and we mustn't get into that this morning, but in general terms, this terminology, which is of course biblical terminology, not extensively used in the Bible, but used in the Bible, that divides the converted from the unconverted.
It's helpful in this connection. Converted that just means being turned, being changed. As a house may be converted so that there is a clear difference in that house, you can see some obvious difference in the house from before it was converted to after it was converted.
And it's the same in the spiritual lives of God's people. There is a difference between being converted and being unconverted.
[6:58] And of course, the biblical usage of that word conversion is to emphasize that there ought to be an outward difference that will be the mark of an inward difference.

The Holy Spirit had emphasized that in the church right from the beginning. In the day of Pentecost it had been emphasized. When at the end of that sermon of Peter's that brought such concern to the congregation that were listening, Peter said, you must repent.
You must turn. If you are going to be a people who have the Holy Spirit, if you are going to be a people who belong to the church of our Lord Jesus Christ and who are indwelt by his Spirit, then the evidence of this will be your repentance, your turning, your changing, so that there will be this difference.
And now along come Ananias and Sapphira. And it seems that they think that they can pretend that there's a difference when there is really no difference.
And so they would give the impression that you can be part of the church without sin, without a change, really mattering. And so the incident takes its course and sin is exposed and the fear of the Lord is within his church.
[8:41] What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira? Well, it was not merely their greed. Greed was there but they didn't need to go to the length that they went to if their sin was merely greed and selfishness.

We learn that very clearly at verse 4. Is it verse 4? Yes, verse 4. As Peter speaks to Ananias, while it remained was it not thine own the possession what he had sold and gave the impression that he was giving it all to the church when he was in fact keeping back part for himself, whilst it remained was it not thine own and after it was sold was it not in thine own power?
You see, there was no compulsion put on the early church with regard to their givings to the good of the church. And this is a principle from which we speak about our own free will offerings.
And they must always be free will offerings. Church authorities must be careful. the minister in the pulpit in his preaching must be careful that he doesn't put too much pressure on the people that it becomes a compulsion from above, from church authorities, what they give of their possessions to the work of Christ's church.
The preacher may use biblical arguments to show how generosity and sacrificial giving is an important means of reflecting the generosity and the sacrificial giving of Christ to ourselves.
[10:24] The preacher may point to the practice of tithing and present it to the people as a help that was in the Old Testament church and may be still of some help to us today.

that we cannot compel people and tell them how much they must give and what proportion they must give. It is to be free will offering by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.
And that's the way it was with Ananias and Sapphira. So if it was greed that was at their heart and only greed, they could have kept their processions for themselves and still have been members of the church.
It looks as if there was the sin of pride there. Pride and its close companion jealousy. Notice how chapter 5 has began with that little word that.
That connects it to what has just gone before and what has just gone before is the way that Barnabas sold a possession and gave it all to the church, sold his land and brought it and laid it at the apostles' feet.
[11:49] Was that the trigger for their pride and for their jealousy? So that we read back Ananias and Sapphira hoping to make the same sort of impression as Barnabas had made.

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Sold a piece. that kept back and brought as if they were bringing all to the Lord and to his church. Whatever it was that was in their heart of course greed and an unwillingness to sacrifice for the Lord's sake was combined with it. And what we are clearly taught by the Holy Spirit through the words of Peter is that it added up to lying against the Holy Spirit or denying the Holy Spirit.
What they were saying you see was that they could enter God's kingdom. They could be a real and a significant part of Christ's church. They could sell themselves off as people to be looked up to as pillars of the church of Christ without the Holy Spirit's work in their hearts.
They could enter in on their own terms as it suited them and so they denied the Holy Spirit and they lied to the Holy Spirit.
[13:15] I suppose we can link this story of Ananias and Sapphira with the sin against the Holy Spirit which Christ talks about the sin that cannot be forgiven.

Is it perhaps something to do with denying the need for the work of God's Holy Spirit in our lives? Will that not be true of everyone who stands at the throne of judgment and finds that their sin is not forgiven by Christ? Whatever will be different about each one will this not be true of everyone who will be separated to the left hand on the day of judgment?
Will they not all be people who have denied the need of the work of the Holy Spirit of God in their lives who have resisted that work and refused that work?
That was the way with Ananias and Sapphira. It is not the way with the people of God. the people of God recognize the enormity of sin.
[14:48] Oh, they may not recognize as much as they ought to but the people of God are all people who have recognized that they need God's catch on their lives to deal with their sin.

to some extent every true member of the church of Christ has so recognized their sin that they have applied to God for his mercy and his power.
They are at least convinced that they cannot work out a way that will satisfy God in their own strength by their own efforts. That is why the cross of Christ becomes so precious to the people of God as they go on in their lives.
That is why the people of God more and more like Paul himself say that they can glory in nothing save on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because the cross is the place where our sin is exposed for the people of faith there is at the same time an ugliness and a beauty in the cross of Jesus Christ.
When the people of faith go to the cross they find it an ugly place. Perhaps too much our ideas of the cross have been flavored by goldsmiths and glaciers who make stained glass windows and who make the cross seem only a thing of beauty.
[16:38] But it's the place where blood was spilled. It's the final fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system.

It's the final fulfillment of the altar that was always in the middle of the people of God. The altar that was like an abattoir, like a slaughterhouse where blood was being spilt, an ugly place that spoke of the enormity of sin in the sight of our holy God.
And we lift up the cross as Christians with shame for our sin. Oh, not as much shame as we ought to feel, but with shame that such a place was necessary for our sin.
And then it becomes a place of beauty because we see on that cross our Lord Jesus Christ and we see his love and his kindness and his grace, grace, that he was willing to suffer the ugliness and the horror of that place that we might be saved and forgiven.
do we know the fear of the Lord today? We will know something of it.
[18:17] We will know that desire to reverence the Lord if we know something of our own sin. Is there need perhaps with every one of us this morning, whatever our spiritual condition, is there need for every one of us to pray to God sincerely in our hearts even in these moments.

Search me and try me and see if there be any wicked way in me. Show me my sin Lord, not just to be morbid, but show me my sin that I may ever recognize my constant need of the work of the Holy Spirit in my life so that I will not sin against him, so that I will not lie to him, so that I will not deny him and his work in my life.
For you are worthy Lord God to be feared, to be honoured, to be loved. Sin is exposed.
And then what happens when the fear of the Lord is in his church? Well, the second thing that happens is that God is exalted. You see, there can be no doubt when we read the story of Ananias and Sapphira that this was an act of divine judgment.

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It wasn't just an act of church discipline. It was an act of direct divine judgment. After all, when Ananias falls down dead, there is no word from Peter that such a thing should happen.
[20:18] What we have here is the direct intervention of Almighty God in giving visible and fearful illustration of the reality of his judgment against sin.

The duplicate experience of Sapphira emphasizes this, that this is not merely the work of a fallible church, but the work of the infallible God.
God. You see, what we have here is evidence that the true church is the place in which God dwells with his people.
The true church is no mere man-made organization. church, the true company of the people of God are the people amongst whom God dwells.
And you see, it's the attitude of Ananias and Sapphira to God that is particularly exposed. They dealt with the church.
[21:40] They thought that they could deceive the leaders of the church in a way that showed that God was not exalted in their thoughts and in their consciences. They thought that they could play with God himself.

They thought that they could deceive God if they could deceive church leaders. And the story is the evidence of the fact that that can never be. We can all be successful hypocrites amongst our fellow men.
either in the pew or in the pulpit there may be a hypocrite this morning and you could never know it and I could never know it that God knows it.
And that's what the story is for. that we might exalt the living God in our hearts and in our minds. That we might tremble before him because he knows us and because he is the God with whom we have to do.
[23:08] the story is here so that we would learn from a very practical and factual situation the truth that the Holy Spirit later writes down in the epistle to the Hebrews where he says it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

God. And notice that that fear of the Lord doesn't need to be a fear that causes us to run away from the Lord.
Because you see that fearful and terrible God is the good God. is the God who is seen and known in Jesus Christ.
What we need and what has been encouraged through this story is a fear of the Lord that will bring us to him with right hearts that we might know him and truly worship him and honour him and know his blessing.
That was the effect on the early church. Yes, we read in verse 11 that great fear came upon all the church and upon us many as heard these things. But did it stop people from being converted?
[24:39] Did it stop people from coming to this God for salvation? No, we read just a little bit later on, is it, in verse 14, and believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes, both of men and women.

so again we, each one of us, need to search our hearts this morning. Do we know the fear of the Lord in our minds and hearts today?
Does the presence of God in Christ make us feel nervous? Make us feel uneasy?
It ought to. It's a paradox I know and I can't explain it, but you who know the Lord should know it. You should know this paradox, that at one and the same time you can feel nervous and uneasy and anxious about your sinfulness in your heart as you stand in his near presence, perhaps in prayer, perhaps in the reading of the word, perhaps when you're sitting in church and you recognize that you're in the presence of the Holy Christ as Peter did long ago beside Lake Galilee when he said, depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord.
And the fear of the Lord, if we know it, will cause us to feel that nervousness, that uneasiness in the presence of our Holy Saviour and yet it does not destroy our peace and it does not destroy our love for him.
[26:30] And even in these moments of nervousness and the feelings of the difficulties of the sin that remains with us, we still say in faith, if God be for me, who can be against me?

God is exalted when the fear of the Lord is known in his church. And the last thing is that hypocrisy is excised the people who are saying, is all this not just a little bit too harsh?

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Is all this perhaps getting a wee bit overbalanced? Will people be turned away from the church because they feel that they have to be perfect in the sight of the all-seeing eye of God?
May it be that people will feel crashed and bruised and hopeless in the presence of our great God.
Well, let's go back to the story.
It's not an awareness of sin. It's not a feeling of sin. It's not a recognition of sin that is turned away from the church in the story of Ananias and Sapphira.
[28:06] It's the deceit and the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira that is judged. It's the lack of honesty that is judged.

And you see where the fear of the Lord is, there will be honesty. there will be that awareness that we cannot and we must not hide our sin.
There will be that awareness that we mustn't put up any pretense. You know the world itself would tell us that lesson and would teach us that lesson.
It's a terrible thing when sometimes the world can be wiser than the people of the church.
The world will make allowances for Christians who sin. But the world will never make allowances for Christians who sin and who act as if they had no sin.
[29:27] And certainly our holy God will make no allowances for such people. For people who sin and who act or make the pretence that they are without sin.

that's what the story of Ananias and Sapphira is about. Hypocrisy must be excised.
Sin must be faced up to for what it is. That's the reason that there must be church discipline. that's the reason that public and scandalous sins must be disciplined in the church.
For the church's discipline will always be fallible. The church will make mistakes. The church will find itself sometimes inadequate.
but the church must always uphold a discipline fallible though it may be that points to the discipline of God which is infallible.
[30:55] And the discipline of the church must always be towards confession and repentance and forgiveness and healing never towards final condemnation.

That's God's prerogative. Hypocrisy is excised. No sin is never finally excised from the church in this world.
That hypocrisy must be. That's what the story of Ananias and Sapphira is finally bringing before us.
Are we people of hidden sin?
Are we people who are ever covering up our sin? If that's the state of our hearts, we can only expect a hardening of our hearts and a final judgment.
But if we will fear the Lord, the opposite of hidden sin will not be no sin at all, but failed sin.
[32:29] failed sin. If we will know the fear of the Lord, we will feel our sin.

We will be troubled about our sin. And we will bring it daily to Christ for forgiveness and for a new work of his spirit that will lead us in the ways of the fear of the Lord, that we may honor him by living lives that please him.
Because we have recognized that he is our only saviour and our only Lord. Lord, are you going to go on in the fear of the Lord today?
Am I? Are you going to continue to cover up your sin? Are you going to continue to make excuses for it?
To try and make light of it and deny it? Or are you going to confess it openly to the Lord? And bow in godly fear and in trust before the Lord Jesus Christ.

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