

Acts 5

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon emphasizes the presence of God in the assembly, the power of God in the apostles, and the preservation of God's servants in spite of suffering and persecution.

Scripture: Acts 5:1

Topics: "Obedience to God", "The Holy Spirit"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the ongoing struggle between the flesh and the spirit within Christians, illustrated by the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who sought to deceive the Holy Spirit for personal gain. Their sin, driven by greed and the desire for reputation, resulted in God's severe judgment, showcasing the seriousness of lying to the Holy Ghost. Despite the assembly's unfaithfulness, Darby reassures that the Holy Spirit remains present and active among believers, capable of working in their lives as in the days of the apostles. The apostles, empowered by the Holy Spirit, continue to preach boldly despite persecution, demonstrating that God's work cannot be thwarted by human opposition. Ultimately, the sermon highlights the importance of obedience to God over human authority and the enduring power of the Holy Spirit in the church.

Transcript

Although a man may be truly a Christian, yet the flesh always remains in him, which is just as ready to shew itself in the assembly as in the world. The desire to have a good reputation among men may arise in the heart, although such a reputation may merely be sought for among Christians. Thus too it happened when the assembly of God first began. Love produced the inclination to think of others rather than of themselves. But the flesh also would have the reputation of doing so, without denying itself, deceitfully thinking to keep back its money, and at the same time to gain the benefit of a reputation for giving it away. But here also the great truth of the presence of the Holy Ghost is the subject of God's revelation given in this book.

Ananias and Sapphira have lied to the Holy Ghost: this is the gravity of the sin of Ananias and his wife. God dwelt in the midst of His own in the assembly. Deceived in heart and conscience by cupidity, whether of money or of human glory, Ananias did not recognise His presence. But still another was acting in this sad event. Satan suggested to them the means of keeping back the money, and still of winning fame. But the Holy Ghost was there, and the folly of men and malice of Satan did nothing but make manifest the truth and the power of His presence, in a sad way it is true, but in a way that could leave no doubt of it.

339 Ananias, whose sin was thus unexpectedly to himself revealed, falls dead by the judgment of God who was there. But what a solemn judgment! And it is not surprising if, not only the Christians, but also the outside world, were terrified at such a testimony to the presence of God that was entirely unmistakable. Moreover the sin was not a simple failure. Ananias and Sapphira had agreed together in their eagerness of endeavour to deceive God, forgetting that He knew everything and that He was there.

But, however sad and solemn the fact might be, it was a testimony from which it was impossible to detract, that God Himself was present; a testimony to the great truth that God, in the person of the Holy Ghost, had come down to dwell in the midst of His people, and for ever (John 14:17), so that they might be taken up to dwell in the Father's house. The apostles were filled with it; everything at that time was in the power of it. But the assembly of God has been unfaithful; the Spirit has been grieved, and therefore we see no longer those actions which bore testimony to His presence.

This, nevertheless, does not in any way render it invalid - that would be impossible. The word of Christ is - He shall dwell with you; and the Spirit is as able to accomplish the will of God in His children now as in the time of the apostles, though it may not be shewn in the same manner. But it is more blessed, says the Lord, to have our names written in heaven than to cast out demons: and by the true work of God in souls, and in all His ways, He manifests His presence in the assembly, and in Christians who depend on Him, and are filled with Him, just as much as He did in the days of the apostles. It is not proper that it should be shewn outwardly in the fallen church as in the faithful assembly long ago established by God Himself, as though He sealed its fall with His approbation. But God changes not, and His grace and power are the same, and are as available as ever for all that is necessary and all that is suitable to the state of the church; and He still does all that is requisite for His glory and our full blessing. He works in His own with the same power according to the circumstances in which they are placed.

340 Now many signs and wonders were wrought by the hands of the apostles, who were to be found habitually (it seems to us) in Solomon's porch in the temple. The great and the rulers did not dare to identify themselves with them; but the people, convinced in their simplicity, increased the number and importance of the Christians in the holy city. We see always fear on the part of the great and of the ecclesiastical rulers. They could persecute, but they could not join the Christians, because then their power would be compromised. As Paul says, "not many mighty, not many noble, are called." The reproach of Christ is always linked to His name, wherever there is fidelity.

But still the power of God manifested itself in such a way that in Jerusalem and in the cities round about they brought sick folks, so that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them; and the sick of the city and those vexed with unclean spirits were all healed. But all this excited the envy and indignation of the chief priests; the divine power and authority had evidently passed away from their hands, and they were unwilling that they should be found elsewhere. They could not prevent God from manifesting His power, but they could take possession of the persons who exercised it, at least when God allowed it. They do so, and throw the apostles into the common prison.

But this did nothing more than prepare the way for another display of the hand and power of God. When God is working, vain are the efforts of men. We have seen, and shall see, the internal power of the Holy Ghost. Here we find angels, the servants of God, in favour of the men who preach the good news of salvation through Christ. I do not doubt that they ever minister, according to the will of God, to all His children who walk in the way of His will; and they may be employed otherwise, if it please God, as it is written in Hebrews 1. But here they operate in a visible way. The angel opens the doors of the prison,

leads the apostles out, and tells them to go their way, and to speak in the temple all the words of this life, which they do at once at break of day.

Meanwhile the high priest and they that were with him meet together in the great council of the Jews, and send the sergeants, commanding them to bring the apostles before them. They go therefore to the prison, which they find shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without before the doors, but no prisoners within. The priests, confounded, know not what to think. Who can make war against God, and not find himself discomfited? Satan can do much, he can persecute and exercise great influence over unbelieving souls; but, where the working of the power of God is present, he cannot surmount it. Confidence is found on the part of God's servants; and, at the bottom of their heart, the adversaries are afraid and perplexed. See Josh. 2:9; Phil. 1:23; 1 Pet. 3:6. Satan had the Sadducees ready to resist the work of the apostles who presented the resurrection, as the Pharisees to oppose Christ who preached true righteousness.

341 But the work of God goes on in the midst of suffering. He allows His own to suffer; it is given to them to suffer for the name of Christ; but He accomplishes His counsels in spite of man. The officers then brought them without violence, fearing the people lest they should have been stoned. The apostles appear before the council, and the high priest reproves them, because they had preached Jesus, in spite of the prohibition, and that thus they thought to bring the blood of Jesus on them. It is apparent that their conscience was ill at ease. The simple truth was that they were responsible for the blood of Jesus; but when a man is spurred on by Satan to commit a crime, he does not fear to do it, but, once committed, the deceit of Satan leaves him; the crime weighs on his conscience, and Satan cannot alleviate it, but often goads him to desperation, as he did with Judas.

The reply of Peter to the rulers is very brief and decisive; already they knew it well. "We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them who obey him." When they heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them.

But here again the hand of God appears; and as He had miraculously used an angel to let Peter out of prison, so now He employs the hand of man to arrest the power and the malice of the elders and high priest. The human prudence of the Pharisee Gamaliel, a man much esteemed, gives them to realise, by several examples, the peril of putting themselves in conflict with God. The Pharisees were always opposed to the Sadducees, and the high priest belonged to the sect of the Sadducees, so that the Pharisee could always employ his human sagacity to gain a hearing. And God could use it to preserve His servants from the wicked hand of their enemies.

342 They consent to the counsel of Gamaliel, but without any fear of God. The will is not changed, the enmity against the testimony of God remains in all its force; but they are afraid of compromising themselves, and know not what to do. The apostles are beaten, and forbidden to speak in the name of Jesus. It is enmity without strength, without conscience, and without knowledge, blind from unbelief, and resisting in vain the power of God! The apostles continue their work, teaching and preaching both in the temple and in every house.

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