

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IS GOD'S DWELLING PLACE

Acts 4:32-5:16

Key Verse: 4:33

“With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.”

Last week we learned the message and spirit of the early Christians. Their message was simple: Only Jesus saves. Peter said, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation that God has provided. Jesus said in Mark 16:16, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Only Jesus saves. There is no other way. Jesus told the early Christians to spread this message in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth. It was not easy. In Jerusalem, they faced opposition and persecution. So they prayed, “Sovereign Lord...enable us to speak your word with great boldness.” Then they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. Like them, we must proclaim the message that only Jesus saves by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today's passage gives us a glimpse inside the early Christian church. It was like paradise on earth. It became a source of blessing for the whole world. But where God is working mightily, Satan also works. Satan attacked the church from within. However, God used the event to clarify the purpose of the church. The Christian church is God's dwelling place. We must come to church to honor God and to have fellowship with God and grow in his image. May God bless our study.

First, the grace of Christ, a giving spirit, and world mission (4:32-37).

The early Christian church was, in a word, like heaven. Jesus was ruling every heart as Christ the Lord. Look at verse 32. “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.” Their spiritual unity was nothing but the work of the Holy Spirit. When they were filled with the Holy Spirit, they could be one in mind and heart. The Holy Spirit is one, but he dwells in each person's heart. He fills each one with the love of God and true joy and peace. This love of the Spirit united the early Christians as one; they were like a beautiful family. As a result, they shared their possessions together. They were not like a hippie commune, full of free-loaders and irresponsible escape artists. They retained ownership of their property. They supported themselves and their families. But they did not claim that their possessions were their own. They did not say, “That's mine!” Instead, they said, “Everything belongs to God. If the Lord needs it, please take it, brother.”

Their spiritual unity came from the Holy Spirit under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Look at verse 33. “With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.” The apostles were testifying that the Lord Jesus had risen and was alive and was ruling the church and the world. They had been warned by the Sanhedrin not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But they were not afraid of men in high positions. They saw the living God with the eyes of faith. Though the religious leaders had crucified Jesus, God raised him from the dead. Now the Lord Jesus was alive and was working in and through them. The more they were persecuted, the stronger their faith grew. The more they were threatened, the bolder and more powerful they became. They were ready to give their lives to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The resurrection message, as well as their life-giving spirit, influenced the early church to be bold in its witness and sacrificial in its giving.

Verse 33 ends, "...and much grace was upon them all." This grace has many aspects, but it is rooted in the resurrection of Jesus. This grace means the grace of forgiveness of sins. When God raised Jesus from the dead, he declared that sinners are justified by faith in Jesus (Ro 4:25). This grace also means the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ (Ro 8:11). He is God living in us and among us. In the Old Testament, God's dwelling place was the Jerusalem temple. Now Jesus is the Temple. Once Jesus was asked for a miraculous sign to prove his authority. He replied, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (Jn 2:19). The temple he was referring to was his body. Jesus was God in the flesh. Jesus died for our sins and rose again from the dead. Jesus ascended into heaven and poured out the Holy Spirit on his people. In this way, he came to live in our hearts. Each believer is like a temple. As the Lord Jesus gathers us together in his name, we form a spiritual community, which we call the Christian church. The church is the dwelling place of our Lord Jesus Christ. The church is not a building or organization. The church is a community of believers who honor Christ as Lord with one heart and mind.

Where Jesus reigns, there is true freedom. They found freedom from the power of sin. They found freedom from the power of death. The Holy Spirit transformed them into spiritual men and women. Former tax collectors became sacrificial men of God. Former prostitutes became holy mothers of prayer. Former demon possessed men became obedient servants of God. Former religious leaders tasted the love of God and gained a true shepherd's heart for others. They were so happy that they would do anything for Jesus. They were filled with inexpressible joy. Their hearts were bursting to please God and be a blessing to others. As soon as they noticed someone in need, they were ready to help without reservation. So there were no needy persons among them. Those who owned lands or houses sold them and brought the money to the apostles, who distributed to anyone as he had need. Those who gave had the joy of giving. Those who received tasted the deep grace of Jesus on them personally. The love of God and true joy and peace were overflowing among the believers.

Luke introduces one of the believers. Look at verses 36-37. "Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." The grace of Jesus had a profound effect on Barnabas. He could see the kingdom of God in Jesus. He could find the meaning of life in Jesus' holy mission. He wanted to give his life for Jesus and the gospel. He began by selling a field he owned and bringing the money to the apostles. His giving spirit grew until he became a leader in the church and a fruitful missionary.

We meet Barnabas again several times in the book of Acts. When the Apostle Paul was first converted, none of the disciples were willing to accept him. But Barnabas saw the work of Jesus in Paul and accepted him and brought him to the Jerusalem church by faith (9:26,27). Later, Barnabas established Paul as a powerful Bible teacher for the Antioch church (11:26). We can say that without Barnabas there would be no Paul. Barnabas was also a good shepherd for Mark. Mark, a city boy and a mommy's boy, deserted the first mission journey team (13:13). It was a great failure. No one wanted to accept Mark, or even look at him, especially Paul. But Barnabas embraced Mark at a high cost (15:39). Through Barnabas' spiritual encouragement, Mark was raised as a great servant of Jesus, the author of Mark's gospel. Indeed, Barnabas knew the grace of Jesus. He saw others with the grace of Jesus. He knew how to sacrifice himself for the work of God. Barnabas was selfless in his dedication to Christ and his love for fellow believers. He embodies the spirit and faith of the early Christians. Here we learn that as the Risen Christ dwells in his church, his grace transforms ordinary people into great servants of God for world mission.

UBF ministry began in Kwang Ju, Korea in the early 1960s. When the resurrection of Christ was proclaimed powerfully by Dr. Lee and Mother Barry, the grace of Jesus filled the hearts of young Korean students. A sacrificial, giving spirit welled up in them and they wanted to do something for the needy and later for world mission. For example, during medical school Dr. Joseph Chung wanted to give something for the poor. He had nothing. So he sold his blood and offered the money for the needy. This giving spirit grew in him until he came to America as a missionary. He is a medical doctor. But he has always given his first priority to teaching the Bible to young American students at no charge. He has also taken care of many poor patients at no charge. He has prayed for American young people with a broken shepherd's heart for more than 25 years. God has used his one-to-one Bible study to raise spiritual leaders for America. Now he is praying to go to North Korea as a missionary. The giving spirit that sprouted in Korea over 40 years ago has produced more than 1600 missionaries to 90 countries.

God began to work through UBF in the USA in the late 1970s. Through the gospel messages of Dr. Lee and Mother Barry, selfish American students were touched by the grace of Christ and began to grow in a giving spirit. Gradually this has produced the beginnings of a missionary movement. John Peace was once a selfish UIC student. He played the role of the tax collector in the 1983 Christmas Drama. But he could not express anything, especially the joy of a changed man in Christ. It was because he was not a changed man in Christ. So he received a lot of coaching. Finally, he repented and accepted the grace of Christ in his heart. He performed extremely well in the drama. More than that, he began to grow as a sacrificial shepherd for God's children. God blessed his sacrificial life by establishing his family with Shepherdess Maria. God blessed his fellowship to be the fastest growing in Chicago UBF. Now he has become Missionary John Peace, a permanent missionary to Ukraine. May God enable us to grow in the grace of Christ, learn a giving spirit, and send many missionaries from America.

Second, Shepherd Peter rebukes Satan's work (5:1-11)

The early Christians' fellowship was beautiful indeed. It was a picture of heaven. It was the womb for raising great spiritual leaders. But where God was working powerfully, Satan appeared. Look at 5:1. A man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. They discussed it among themselves and decided not to offer the full amount, but to keep part of it for themselves. This was perfectly okay. The land was Ananias' to do with as he pleased. The proceeds of the sale were his as well. The problem was that he tried to deceive the church members into thinking that he had offered the whole amount when he had not. He wanted to be recognized as a sacrificial servant of God like Barnabas, when he was not. He did not see the Risen Christ dwelling in the church. He saw the Christian church as a place to gain honor for himself. He brought his offering and placed it at Peter's feet expecting to be recognized. Well, in a way he was recognized.

Look at verse 3. "Then Peter said, 'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?'" Peter was not deceived by Ananias. Peter knew that Satan was in Ananias' heart. Satan made him a liar. Satan made him a hypocrite. Satan wanted to turn the Christ-centered fellowship into a human honor society. Perhaps Peter remembered Jesus' warning to watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy (Lk 12:1). This disease could spread through their fellowship like gangrene and ruin their Christ-centered spirit. Peter was very clear toward Christ's enemy, Satan. Peter rebuked Ananias immediately. He rebuked him for lying to the Holy Spirit. What happened to him? Verse 5 says he fell down and died. Lying to the Holy Spirit is a most serious sin indeed. It comes from unbelief. Worse than that, it comes from Satan himself.

When Sapphira first heard about her husband's scheme, she should have stood on God's side to help him repent, as a suitable helper. But she agreed with him. A wife must honor God more than her husband, and vice-versa. Christ must be honored in the private conversations in a house church. What happened to Sapphira? About three hours later, she came in. Their hidden conspiracy was exposed openly as the work of Satan. Peter said, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord?" At that moment she also fell down and died.

What was the effect on the church? Verse 11 says, "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events." This fear was the fear of God. The fear of God is awesome respect for the holiness and majesty of God. We must know that God is the Judge of men's hearts. God has the power of life and death. God does not allow Satan into his holy dwelling. We must fear God and resist Satan.

Fortunately, this event was unique in the history of the Christian church. If the Holy Spirit put to death every sinner who came into the church, no one would be left. Still, we must know that God was making a statement: The Christian church is God's dwelling place. Those who try to make use of God's church for their own benefit are playing a dangerous game. Those who come to church to seek a boyfriend or girlfriend, or connections to get a job should repent before God.

The Christian church is also the dwelling place of the truth. Paul describes the Christian church as, "God's household...the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1Ti 3:15b). Therefore, Christians must accept God's word in their hearts. Christian churches must focus on Bible study. By the way, testimony sharing time is not the time to show off. It is the time to repent honestly before God. Then God has mercy on us. Then God changes us into his holy children. Apostle John said, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1Jn 1:8-9). May God help us to honor the word of God in the Christian church. May God help us to recognize the Christian church as God's dwelling place.

Third, God pours out his grace to heal and to save (5:12-16).

After Ananias and Sapphira's event, the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. Verse 13 says that no one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless more and more men and women believed in the Lord. Many sincerely repented and accepted Christ as Lord. God purifies his church for them. Through the purified church, God was pleased to pour out his grace all the more. Verses 15-16 say, "As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed."

In this passage we learn that the Christian church is not a human organization. The Christian church is God's dwelling place. He invites us to come for grace that transforms us into his holy children. He wants to use us for his purpose of world salvation. We must not come for petty personal benefit. We must listen to his word and repent of our sins. Then we can grow in Christ and be happy in his grace.