

Place: Lurgan Baptist 30:1:2007

Reading: Acts 5: 1-12

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

11. A GREAT CHURCH BUT ?

The dearest thing on this earth to the apostle Paul was the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was Paul who wrote some beautiful words concerning Christ's love for His church. To the Ephesian believers Paul said three things about the church of our Lord. He compared the church, first of all, to a **Building** and that has to do with the **Foundation** of the Church. He writes, “ *In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord.*” (Eph 2:21) Second, he compared the church to a Body and that has to do with the **Function** of the Church. Speaking of Christ he says, He is “ *the head over all things to the church, which is His body.*” (Eph 1:22) But then in (Eph Ch 5) Paul compared the church to a **Bride** and that has to do with the **Fidelity** of the Church. He writes, “ *this is a great mystery but I speak concerning Christ and the church.*” (Eph 5:32)

Paul was sold on the church and had a high regard for the church of the Lord Jesus. Now with the Baptism of the Spirit the church was born on the day of Pentecost. In (Acts Ch 2) we see the beginning of the church, but

the Book of Acts is a glowing account not only of the beginning but also of the continuation of the church loved by the Lord Jesus. Now one conspicuous word constantly claims our attention in the Divine description of the Early Church. The word is **great**. Now that word **great** carries many meanings and so often is bandied about in religious circles. Everything today is called great. If we are proud of the church where we worship we call it a great church. We speak of great buildings, great music, great choirs, great oratory, great preaching but we can get many of those things in a football stadium, at a wrestling match, or at a political rally.

When we use this word great we don't often mean what the Scriptures mean for God's standard of greatness is utterly foreign to that of this world. My when we speak of a great church we may mean large buildings, wealth, ornate ritual, many members, influence, prestige, historic importance, a famous pastor. But a great New Testament Church means none of these things. What then was that first church like, when it burst forth with news of God's love for a needy world ?

What is it that makes a church truly great ? What was so great about this early church ? You see, we are great today where they were small and we are small where they were great. So our study this is **A Great Church but ? But what ?** Well, being a **Great Church** did not mean they were exempt from problems for they were a **Great Church**, but they were not a **Perfect Church** ! Now on at least six different occasions this word **great** appears in the opening

chapters of the Book Acts. Notice that this early church was a church with,

(1) “ GREAT POWER,”

Look at (4:33) It literally means “ *mega-power.*” The root for the Greek word translated “ *power,*” is the origin of our English word “ *dynamite.*” Now the church came into being by the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and a true church only operates by His power ! My big buildings may be erected, large memberships gathered, impressive services held, much money lifted, and many good things done all without the Holy Spirit. Some churches would not the difference if the Holy Spirit went out of business but a great church is a church with ***Great Power.*** You see in this Powerful Church they had,

(a) SPIRITUAL MEN:

“ *And with great power gave the **apostles** witness*” (4:33) Now you know of course that God does not bless buildings or bulletins but people and only as we have power with God personally can we have power collectively. Where did they receive this power ? (4:31) They became a *Powerful people* because they were a *Praying people.* Tennyson put it well when he said, “ *More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.*” Now they had no power in the financial realm, the political realm, the commercial realm, but they had power in the spiritual realm. They had power with God and they had power with man and they received this power on their knee’s and in their closets. This powerful church had (a) but then it used,

(b) A SCRIPTURAL METHOD:

“ *And with great power gave the apostles **witness***” (4:33) Do you recall what the Saviour told them to be ? (1:8) And one form of witnessing that the Early Church believed in was preaching. (2:22 4:10 4:31) A few years ago the prophets of doom announced the end of preaching. They pronounced the doom of preaching. They told us that the preaching of the gospel was going to be ineffective. They claimed we have to have drama and we have to have dialogue and we must have talkbacks. Now I agree there’s a lot of dead preaching. I heard about the pastor who was preaching in the heart of the country and along came a gust of wind and blew his notes out of the window. *A cow came along and ate his notes and the cow dried up.*

Yes, I agree, there's too much dead preaching. But when a man of God is filled with the Spirit of God, saturated with the Word of God and preaching for the Glory of God I expect something to happen ! But will you notice that these (a) who used this (b) emphasised a,

(c) SIGNIFICANT MIRACLE:

What did they witness about ? “ *The resurrection of the Lord Jesus.*” (4:33) The very thing that the Sanhedrin had forbidden them to do. (4:18) Now the interesting thing is this, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus was the major emphasis of apostolic preaching.

(2:24 32, 3:15 5:30 10:40 13:30 33, 34, 37)

And although they knew that such an emphasis greatly offended the Jewish authorities, the apostles never suppressed that truth to avoid that offence. My they did not talk about themselves, the heart of their testimony was that He had risen and was alive for evermore. It was the resurrection they preached.

Historically, it was undeniable and unprecedented. There had never been anything like it in all the long annals of time. **Theologically**, it was the very essence of the new faith. **Apologetically**, it was unanswerable. My they exalted and extolled the Lord Jesus and a church like that cannot be stopped. (1)

(2) “ GREAT GRACE,”

Look if you will at (4:33) again. “ *And great grace was upon them all.*” Literally it means “ *mega-grace.*” Now of how many churches can it be said, “ *Great grace was upon them all ?*” When we talk of great churches we say little about the grace of God. We politely refer to it in the benediction, “ *The grace of the Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all.*”

Though our thoughts are often elsewhere. (2 Cor 13:14) You see a church is great only in proportion to its measure of grace. Now did you know that there's more than one kind of grace in the Bible ? You say the only kind I know is

“ *Amazing grace.*” My all of God's grace is amazing. You see there is,

(a) SAVING GRACE:

“ *For by grace are ye saved through faith*”
(Eph 2:8)

“ *Twas grace that wrote my name
In life's eternal book,
Ttwas grace that gave me to the Lamb
Who all my sorrows took.*”

My have you experienced saving grace ? Now there is no appropriate response to *saving grace* except thanksgiving. The hearts of these believers were like Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, whom David chose to graciously care for after Jonathan's death, promising that his land would be restored to him and that he would always have place at the king's table. Do you recall Mephibosheth's response ? “ *What is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such a dead dog as I*

am ?” (2 Sam 9:8) Is that how you feel about saving grace ? Is your heart overflowing with thanksgiving ? But don't stop there. Many believers do. “ I'm saved, Hallelujah, I'm going to heaven, praise the Lord,” But don't stop there. For there is,

(b) GIVING GRACE:

Look at (4:34-35) These believers had a new sense of responsibility toward one another, and they saw their possessions as a trust given by God to be used as needed among the family. Did you know that there was no such thing as a needy person in that church ? (4:34

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Party causes, petty claims, little ownership's and narrow boundaries were carried away by the flow of the Spirit, and hand joined heart as the church cared for both the spiritual and social needs of one another. Here were a company of people who were obedient to the Biblical injunction, “ *Let us not love in word, neither in tongue: but in deed and in truth.*” (1 Jn 3:18) (a) and (b) and,

(c) DYING GRACE:

You see for the sake of Christ they “ *were killed all the day long,*” and were counted as “ *sheep for the slaughter,*” but they were “ *more than conquerors,*” through God's great grace. (Rom 8:36) My it was dying grace which enabled Stephen to say, “ *Lord lay not this sin to their charge.*” (Acts 7:60) Dying Grace. “ *And great grace was upon them all.*” What is grace ? It is God’s provision for our need when we need it. Someone has put it in the following words.

*“ Grace when the sun is shining Lord,
Grace when the sky is black
Grace when I get the unkind word
Grace on the too smooth track
Grace when I am elbowed into a nook
Grace when I get my turn
Grace when the dinner won’t cook
Grace when the fire won’t burn

Grace when my duties go wrong
Grace when they all go right*

*Grace when its gladness, praise and song
Grace when I have to fight
Grace when my clothes are fresh and new
Grace when they are old and dull
Grace when my purse is empty too
Grace when it is over full*

*Grace when the saved ones don’t act saved
Grace when they all blame
Grace when I’m denied the good I’ve craved
Grace when I’m given my plea
Grace when the midnight hours I tell
Grace when the morn is nigh
Grace when I’m healthy, strong and well
Grace when I come to die.”*

“ *And great grace was upon them all.*” (4:33) (1) (2)
But come with me to (Ch 5) and notice now there was,

(3) “ GREAT FEAR,”

Look at (5:11) Now some have questioned whether or not Ananias and Sapphira were true believers. I think it is best to see them as genuine Christians and that for several reasons.

1. They were included in “ *the multitude of them that believed.*” (4:32)
2. They were involved with the Holy Spirit, thus indicating a relationship to Him.
3. If they were not genuine Christians, what lesson

about sin, did this give to teach all the rest who were true believers ?

4. Satan, can become personally involved, with Christians. Do you recall Peter ? One moment at Caesarea Philippi he was confessing Christ to be the Son of the Living God, the next he was seeking to dissuade the Lord Jesus from going to the cross. So much so that Christ said unto him, “ *Get thee behind me Satan.* ” (Matt 16:23) So Satan, can become personally involved with believers.

5. Finally, death can be divine chastisement for a Christian. (1 Cor 11:30-32) As it was there.

George MacDonald wrote, “ *Half of the misery in the world comes from trying to **look** instead of trying to **be**, what one is not.* ” The name that the Lord Jesus gave to this practice is “ *hypocrisy.* ” Originating in the Greek theatre, the word **hypocrite** initially referred to an actor, who donned elaborate masks to play his roles. When Christians put on masks, they play roles too. What does God think of our playacting ? What does God think when we pretend to be something we are not. How often have we laughed heartily to be appear fun-loving ? Or posed a deep question to appear intellectual ? Or given money to appear generous ? Or exposed another’s sin to appear holy ? My what does God think of our playacting ? He takes it seriously a fact Ananias and Sapphira discovered when their pretend game turned deadly ! It all started with,

(a) SINFUL PRETENCE:

Ananias which means, “ *God is gracious,* ” and

Sapphira which means “ *beautiful,* ” had witnessed Barnabas magnificent act and had seen the great respect that it drew from the believers. Maybe they thought,

“ *We too, would like to hear some applause.* ” If this was true, then their motives were impure. But what about their actions ? Was it wrong for them to sell the land and give only a portion of the proceeds to the church ? No, not necessarily. My they sinned when they **pretended** to give it all. (Matt 6:1-6) This was pious pretence, religious sham, simulated holiness, Christian fraud. Are we guilty of it ? Do we try to make others think we are more spiritual than we are ? Do we create the impression that we are people of prayer when we are not ? Do we promote the idea that we are generous when we are so tight we squeak when we smile ? Do we misrepresent our spiritual effectiveness ? (a) led to,

(b) SPIRITUAL PERCEPTION:

For Peter said “ *Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost.* ” (5:3-4) Incidentally this passage teaches two vitally important truths about the Holy Spirit. First, it affirms that He is a Person, not an influence or impersonal force since He can be lied to. Second (5:3) says Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit while (5:4) says that he lied to God, a clear affirmation of the Deity of the Holy Spirit. But my can you picture the scene ? Ananias has just finished laying his gift at Peter's feet, and the organ has just finished playing, “ *I surrender all.* ” Ananias heart begins to thump. He feels dizzy and confused. Why

isn't Peter smiling ?

Because he saw through their **hypocrisy**. You see the Holy Spirit knew all about the trick. He had been present in the home, had heard their conversation, knew the market price of that property, knew all about their conspiracy. He knew how much the conniving couple had decided to give and how much was still in the bank. He was present when Ananias kissed his wife goodbye that morning. He walked beside Ananias all the way to the church, prodding his conscience, troubling his soul. He stood sadly and silently by as the deception was consummated, and Ananias gave his gift. Then He flashed the whole lying picture into unsuspecting Peter's mind, gave him an instantaneous gift of discernment, and told him what to do. My is this not solemn ? Do we not easily forget that the Holy Spirit knows all the minute details of our personal and church life ? (a) led to (b) which led to,

(c) SWIFT PUNISHMENT:

For God moved quickly to remove this spiritual cancer from the body. Look at (5:5) My God struck these pair dead for pretending a full dedication which they had not made. And this action of God was meant to impress upon the church the seriousness of the sins of the saints. It had that effect, as (5:11) indicates. “ *And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as heard as heard these things.*” You see many knew this erring couple. No doubt, new friendships had developed with them. But now they were dead by God's hand. There was “ *great fear,*” in the church,

and along with that, I'm sure much soul searching and long bouts of prayer. What if such a thing happened today ? Can you imagine if a pastor or elder or a church leader was speaking falsehood to the church and suddenly fell over dead ? What would that do to us ? We would surely begin to think about our own integrity or the lack of it.

Dr. Barnhouse, on the basis of this passage, would never let his congregation sing the third verse of “ *Years I spent in vainly and pride.*” The third verse goes like this,

**“ *Now I have given to Jesus everything,
Now I gladly own Him as my King.*”**

“ *You see,*” said Barnhouse, “ *if God acted in the same way today that he did in the fifth chapter of Acts, you'd have to a morgue in the basement of every church and an undertaker on the pastoral staff.*” The truth is we, would not have a pastoral staff either. Someone has said

“ *This is a bad spot on the record of the church but rather than reveal the **Iniquity** of the church, it reveals the **Purity** of the church.*” For here was a church so operating in the power of the Holy Spirit that sin was an exception rather than a rule. Liars could not stand this church in Jerusalem. A church that had a holy awe and respect for God. Is this us ? Do we fear God ? Have we become so busy being happy that we have forgotten to be holy ? (1) (2) (3)

(4) “ GREAT PERSECUTION,”

This brings us to (8:1) When we speak of a great church, we usually mean a popular or prosperous church, but my this was a persecuted church. Let me pick out three words in (8:1) “ At that time,” Notice

(a) THE TIMING OF SATANS ONSLAUGHT:

“ At that time,” At what time ? At the time when the church had **great power, great grace, great fear.**”

“ At that time,” There was great persecution for the devil never takes it lying down. You see the death of Stephen signalled a fierce outbreak of persecution against the Jerusalem church. Nearly all the opposition against Christianity in the Acts came from the Jews. The Holy Spirit describes this outbreak as, “ a great persecution.” My the tactic’s of the devil have not changed. After times of blessing Satan attacks,

After seasons of refreshment Satan attacks, after periods of fruitfulness Satan attacks. Are you enjoying the Lord's blessing at that the moment ? Then watch out for the devil will be at your heels ! There was (a) but notice how God turned this whole thing around for the persecution by Satan simply accomplished the Holy Spirits purpose for (8:4) talks about,

(b) THE FOILING OF SATANS ONSLAUGHT:

“ Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word.” (8:4) Do you see what happened ? God used that which the Devil

intended to hinder the church to help the church. You say, “ *Nothing good can ever come out of persecution.*” No ! Will here God turned **members** into **missionaries**. Do you recall what Christ said ? “ *Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and in **Samaria**,*” (1:8) But the Jerusalem church had settled down like a bug smug in a rug so the Lord allowed the devil to use persecution.

So what happened ? My when you throw a coal in a crowd they scatter. That's what happened here and the people who were scattered by persecution spread the gospel. At first glance, Stephens death may have seemed pointless, but his death triggered the first persecution against the entire church, and that persecution scattered the Jerusalem fellowship, the result ? The gospel was spread abroad. On Sunday, January 8th 1956, on the shore of a lonely river deep in the jungle of Ecuador, five missionaries were murdered by primitive Auca Indians. News of the massacre shocked the world. To some their death seemed a senseless tragedy. Many decried the promising missionary careers cut short, the five young wives bereft of their husbands, the children left fatherless. Those with deeper spiritual insight saw things differently. Elisabeth Elliot, widow of one of the martyrs Jim Elliot said this.

“ *To the world at large this was a sad waste of five young lives. But God has His plan and purpose in all things. There were those whose lives were changed by what happened on Palm Beach. In Brazil, a group of Indians on a mission station deep in the Mato Grosso,*

upon hearing the news, dropped to their knees and cried out to God for forgiveness for their own lack of concern for fellow Indians who did not know of Jesus Christ. An Air Force Major stationed in England, with many hours of jet flying, immediately began making plans to join the Missionary Aviation Fellowship. Off the coast of Italy, an USA naval officer was involved in an accident at sea. As he floated alone on a raft he recalled Jim Elliot's words (which he had read in a news report) ' when it comes time to die, make sure that all you have to do is die.'

He cried to the Lord there and then was saved. In Des Moines Iowa, an eighteen year old boy prayed for a week in his room, then announced to his parents, " I'm turning my life over completely to the Lord. I want to try to take the place of one of those five." And then we say, " nothing good can ever come out of persecution." The problem with us is, we are not meeting opposition because we have come to terms with the world. We are living in peaceful coexistence with the age, forgetting that the friend of the world is the enemy of God. Such a policy will produce a popular and prosperous church a great church in the eyes of men, but not great in the eyes of God, " for all that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

(2 Tim 3:12) Does all this sound too serious and sombre ? Well, there is a different note sounded in (8:8) (1) (2) (3) (4)

(5) " GREAT JOY,"

Now why was there great joy ? Well, for one thing,

(a) GODS POWER WAS OBVIOUS:

Look at (8:7) Miracles were wrought, souls were saved (8:13) believers were baptised (8:12) No wonder there was great joy for when people get right with God and consequently get right with each other heaven comes down and glory fills the soul. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, turn these things loose in a community and great will be the joy that follows. (Ps 144:15) (a) And then,

(b) GODS PEOPLE WERE VICTORIOUS:

The early church possessed joy. We read, "*they did their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.*" (2:46) Then one of their number Philip was scattered because of persecution and he got up and moved out of the home nest and Samaria got the blessing. The man who possessed joy, and preached joy, produced joy. You see if you possess joy and preach joy then you will produce joy. Its contagious other's will get it ! Now if you catch measles you can pass them on. My why not pass on a little joy ? The joy of Him who said, "*these things have I spoken unto you that your joy might be full.*" (Jn 15:11) And if our joy is full we will be joyful. Joy that smiles through tears. Joy that looks through a prison cell and shouts, "*Rejoice in the Lord alway and again I say rejoice.*" (Phil 4:4) Look at our final passage this in (11:21) 1,2,3,4,5,

(6) " GREAT NUMBER,"

Sometimes we hear the church today is living in the Book of Numbers. Certainly, some are too busy counting noses and numbers. It has been said, “ *it is time to stop counting numbers and begin making numbers count.*” But my there is a place for statistics and the Book of Acts abounds in numbers and additions. The difference is, then they were a *RESULT* but today they are a goal. The early church started out with great power, grace, fear, persecution, joy, and the great numbers followed. You see they were fruitful and that,

(a) IN SPITE OF HUMAN RESISTANCE:

Look at (12:1) The power of Satan was released through Herod’s hands and right throughout this book we see the power of Satan through human resistance, but the Early Church were still fruitful. (a) But fruitful:

(b) BECAUSE OF DIVINE ASSISTANCE:

Look at the contrast between (12:1) and (11:21) My is this not what we need more than anything else ? The hand of God with us, the blessing of God upon us and when there is that there will be growth, fruit, and development. (2:4 5:14 6:7) So it went and the growth, the increase, the additions, were a result of Christian living and witnessing in great power and grace and fear and joy. You see when we fulfil the conditions God will give the increase.

My such is the pattern of a great church. A church is

great in God's sight only in proportion as it is a church of great power, grace, fear, and joy, enduring great persecution. And when it is great in all these, great numbers will believe and turn to the Lord. But then a church is made of individual Christians and its only as we have great Christians that we can have a great church. My as you place your life against the lives of these early believers how do you fare ? Would you seek to answer this question in closing,

*“ What kind of church would my church be,
If every member were just like me.”*