

February 16, 2020

SATAN'S ATTACKS AGAINST A GLORIOUS COMMUNITY

Acts 4:32-6:7

*(4 of 17 in a series through Acts)*

One of the most enlightening scenes in Scripture is given to us in Revelation 12. In vivid imagery of a woman giving birth to a child, a dragon being cast down from heaven, and a war breaking out, we're reminded that the devil did everything he could to prevent the work of Christ and failed; Satan now has no standing in heaven to accuse the people of God because Christ lived, died, and rose for us; and, therefore, Satan has been at war with the church of God ever since, attempting to destroy it. He is described in Scripture as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8), waging war with the people of God because he knows his time is short.

Therefore, the Scripture says that we need to be sober-minded and watchful. As individuals—and as a church—we do not need to think that we can simply drift along and things will go well. Think of the picture of a herd of elephants walking through the wilderness with a group of lions walking alongside them. The elephants never forget that they need to be ever so vigilant. They're working to keep the baby elephants in the middle of the herd, to make sure not one elephant strays off on his own, and that they don't find themselves in a place where they need to be divided. But the key is that they're alert, aware of the enemy's presence, sober-minded.

In the same way, as a church, we must not lose sight of the fact that we have an enemy seeking to destroy us. We must always be working to make sure that we're not just drifting but working hard to maintain our faithfulness to biblical beliefs and practices. And one text that reminds us of the presence and wicked practices of the devil is the text we're looking at this morning—Acts 4:32-6:7. Luke begins the text by showing us a glorious picture of the church community in these early and glorious days, but then he immediately follows that scene by putting together three episodes in the life of the early church that I think serve the purpose of showing us the devil's schemes. In other words, Luke groups these stories to show us different ways that the enemy works to destroy the church. I want us then to learn from what Luke is showing us here so that we might be sober-minded and alert as a church, taking the steps necessary to ensure that we walk in a faithful to the Lord in the midst of these evil days (Eph. 5:15-16). But let's first start where Luke starts by looking at another glorious picture the early church in 4:32-37.

**The glorious community of faith**

Right before Luke shows us the attacks of the devil against the church, he gives us a glimpse of the glorious community of faith—the church—just like he'd shown us at the end of chapter 2, and it's remarkable. They “were of one heart and soul,” were generous with what they had so that “there was not a needy person among them,” and some were even selling what they had and laying the proceeds at the apostles' feet so that they could distribute it to any who had need. The apostles were continuing to preach and walk in great power. And great grace was upon them. It was a remarkable time, a remarkable picture, and a remarkable community.

I mentioned that I preached through Acts twenty years ago, and it hit me this week that when I did so, there were only a few of us, meeting in a Tractor Supply House building with a leaky roof, and I was probably feeling a bit of self-pity. And I remember making the point along my way through the book of Acts that if a church really wanted to function like a healthy community of believers, then it needed to be small. I think that statement probably stemmed from a sense of self-righteousness, self-pity, and envy. But the reality is this picture of the church in Acts 4:32-37 is a description of a church with a minimum of 5,000 people (and perhaps many more).

So how did they do it? How did they have such an enviable community when they weren't pulling this off with only a twenty people or so? Aside from the obvious answers of the apostles' teaching and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, I think a key to the answer is found in 4:36-37. Luke writes, "Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet."

Now think about this for a second. Luke has already told us that the "full number of those who believed . . . had everything in common" and that many sold their houses or lands and brought the proceeds to the disciples. So, why single out one individual? My guess is that it's because he wants to introduce this character to us who'll become more prominent—an individual so encouraging that most of us don't even know him by his name (Joseph) but only by his nickname (Barnabas—which means "son of encouragement"). But one other benefit of mentioning an individual by name who showed such a generous heart is that it's a reminder that the church doesn't function in the abstract; it's made up of individuals, their beliefs, and their actions. Here's what I mean. If we want to be a church who loves one another, then that's only possible by each of us as individuals choosing to love one another. For us to be a church that is generous and giving with our finances will require us to be made up of individuals who are generous and giving with our finances. So perhaps question each of us might ask ourselves is, "If everyone was committed to pray as I pray, give as I give, love as I love, gather with the saints as I gather with the saints, commit themselves to learning and obeying God's Word as I do, etc., would we be considered a praying, giving, loving, gathering, biblically-committed people?" And I don't ask that to condemn anyone. I've known these realities among this church more deeply than I've known them anywhere. But it's a good question that each of us can ask ourselves in examination in order to come face-to-face with the reality that churches which are (committed to Scripture, giving, prayerful, etc.) are that way because they're made up of individuals who are (committed to Scripture, giving, prayerful, etc.). But when the Holy Spirit moves in our hearts as these individuals were moved in their hearts, what a glorious picture of a community of faith he produces.

But because we have an enemy who seeks to do as much damage to the church as possible, you can imagine that Satan unleashed his attack on this early community, and Luke confirms just in 5:1-6:7. So now I want us to look at the attacks of the devil against the church.

## The attacks of the devil against the church<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, because the devil is so crafty, he doesn't simply attack in one way. Rather, we see three different avenues of attack, and I want to identify them one by one. And the first is moral corruption.

### *Moral Corruption*

The first area in which the enemy attacked the church was in the area of moral corruption within the church. In the midst of all of these good things happening, Luke tells us that a couple named Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property, decided to keep part of the proceeds for themselves, but lay it at the apostles' feet as if they were giving the whole sum. And they decided that each of them would come and present the money one at a time. First, then, came Ananias. But as soon as he laid the portion of the money at the apostles' feet, 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? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God" (5:3-4).

In other words, this wasn't socialism. The apostles weren't forcing anyone to distribute what they had to others. This was simply voluntary generosity. Ananias could have kept all the proceeds, some of the proceeds, or none of the proceeds. He could have left it unsold altogether. But he wanted to be seen as generous while actually not having a giving heart. And Luke tells us that Ananias simply fell dead as Peter spoke these words, "and great fear came upon all who heard of it" (5:5).

Later, then, Sapphira came in, having no idea what had happened with her husband. And Peter asked her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much," and she answered "Yes, for so much." But she—like her husband—was lying, and Peter declared, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out" (5:8-9), and she fell dead as well. And Luke concludes, "And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things" (5:11).

As I mentioned last week, this was an extraordinary time in the life of the church. Not only are the healing miracles of the most miraculous nature and the evangelism so powerful that literally thousands are believing with each sermon preached, but also those who are lying and being hypocrites are falling dead.

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<sup>1</sup>This outline is a close summary of what John Stott provides in his excellent commentary: *The Message of Acts*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990), 105-24.

Now, why? I mean, we can ask and answer that in regard to the other extraordinary events. Thousands are believing through the apostles' preaching because the Spirit is powerfully opening men's eyes and hearts in these early days. The miracles and healings are so extraordinary because it seems that the Lord is validating the work and witness of the apostles through signs and wonders. But why does the Lord instantly kill a husband and wife who were merely being hypocrites?

I think the answer is that one of the greatest threats to the church is moral corruption among its members. In other words, in these early days, if the Lord had allowed the reputation of his church to be that of a hypocritical, morally corrupt people, then the apostles' teaching about obeying Christ's commands would fall flat and feel empty, wouldn't they? People may well respond, "Why are you telling us to do these things when we know your own members do nothing of the sort?"

And this was the very scheme of Satan. Peter acknowledges this, telling Ananias that it was Satan who filled his heart to lie in this way (5:3). Now, the reality for us—as with all churches—is that there will be sin. And, perhaps thankfully, immediate death usually doesn't follow. But nor does the Lord allow us to ignore it. This is why he has commanded us, first, to exhort one another daily so that we're not hardened by the deceitfulness of sin but repent from sin (Heb 3:12-14). And it's also why the Scripture commands us to practice discipline if someone refuses to repent, ultimately removing that individual from the church. The reasons being for the person's good (hopefully they'll repent), the church's purity, and for the church's witness (we are called to be a holy people before the world). So let's make sure to hold ourselves—as challenging as it is—to be a church who'll not turn a blind eye toward sin but call ourselves and—in love, as occasion requires—one another to repentance.

The second way we see Satan's attack is through physical persecution.

### ***Physical persecution***

I won't say all that could be said here because we noted it in last week's text, but we see this again in 5:12-42. It basically follows the same format. The apostles work mighty miracles. This time people are even bringing the sick from the towns around Jerusalem, and Luke tells us, and "they were all healed" (5:16). And they are preaching—right in the temple—as they had been forbidden to do. So the temple leaders took them once more, and imprisoned them. But this night something odd happened.

Luke tells us in 5:19-20, "But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 'Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.'" So they did. And when the temple leaders heard of this, found them gone from the prison, and saw them preaching in the temple, they took them once more to question them. Well, really they just threatened them again, and Peter gave them the same answer about being bound to obey God and witness to Jesus (5:29-32).

Then the temple leaders got mad. Well, that's an understatement. Luke says they "were enraged and wanted to kill them" (5:33). But one of their own named Gamaliel urged caution, reminding them that others had arisen and had died out. Therefore, if this is a movement like one of those, it'll die out as well. And if it's really of God, they don't want to be found fighting against God. And with that, the leaders agreed not to kill them, but they did beat them and charged them not to preach about Jesus any more. But, Luke writes, "They left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for his name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus" (5:41-42).

This attack—that of physical persecution—is perhaps one of the oldest schemes of the devil against the Lord's people. And we're going to see that it continues in the book of Acts. In fact, it is going to be ratcheted up. Believers will be martyred, and this has continued throughout the centuries into the present. We could tell stories of believers who were faithful to Christ until their lives were taken from them all afternoon.

And there may come a day when persecution against Christians in our own country intensifies. We've seen it in some ways, with believers being branded in the same company as bigots and racists because we obey the Bible in teaching that homosexual acts are sinful. It may be that schools like Union see their students unable to get financial aid, or businesses blackballed or sued because they're attempting to honor Christ in their practices. We've already seen some of these things, and there's no reason to expect they won't continue and intensify in degree.

So I simply want to exhort us now to pray for the strength to keep on honoring Jesus, as the apostles are doing, and to recognize that when we suffer for Jesus' sake, we should see it as a cause for rejoicing. You and I haven't been put on this planet to live a easy, peaceful life. We're been put here to bring honor and glory to Jesus. And if he should choose to shed our blood and spend our lives to honor his holy name, we should recognize the honor that is. We should also recognize as we endure the physical wrath of Satan in this life in allegiance to Christ, that we will be spared the wrath of the Lamb in the life to come. But those who do not bow the knee to Christ, though they may be spared the wrath of Satan in many ways in this life, will face the wrath of the Lamb in eternity. And no one will be able to bear his wrath. So let us endure now, knowing that our Lord—Jesus Christ—will preserve us in his arms, raise our dead bodies one day, and welcome us into his kingdom.

Finally, we see the attack of Satan in the form of distraction.

### ***Distraction***

About what we see in 6:1-7, John Stott has said that this devilish attack "was the cleverest of the three,"<sup>2</sup> and I think he is right simply because it doesn't look like an attack. It looks like

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 120.

something good. And—to make matters even more difficult—it *is* good. But it's a distraction. Let me explain.

It begins with a complaint. Luke tells us, “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution” (6:1). Here's what's going on. The church is getting quite large, and growth makes things better in some ways and more challenging in some ways. One way that it becomes more challenging is that there are more people to care for, and in this instance, more widows to care for. Not only that, but not everyone was the same culturally. And two cultural groups were the Greek Jews and the Hebraic Jews. In other words, everyone was Jewish, but one group were a bit more Greek culturally. They spoke Greek, probably adopted Greek cultural practices, etc. The other group was a bit more Hebraic culturally. They probably spoke Aramaic and practiced non-Greek ways. So, they were culturally different—much in the same way one might divide our congregation culturally a dozen different ways.

Well, that's obviously a good thing except that in this instance, the Greek widows were claiming they were being neglected when the church brought around food to distribute to those in need. And this is an issue that needed attention. It could threaten to divide the church if indeed they wanted to divide along these cultural lines. So the apostles jumped to address the issue.

But it's at this very point where we see Satan's scheme. If the apostles had said, “This issue is a big deal (and it was) and needs attention (and it did), so we will handle the food distribution ourselves,” then they would have spent their time distributing food to widows all day every day and not—*and this is the point*—dedicating themselves to teaching and preaching God's Word and praying. In other words, the attack of the devil on this occasion was to distract the apostles and turn them away from the Word and prayer.

But they saw through the scheme, and so we read, “Therefore, 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. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word” (6:3-4). And Luke tells us, “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” (6:7).

Brothers and sisters, if we as a church turn our attention away from teaching and preaching God's Word and praying in order to do other good things, we will fall into the designed trap of our enemy. If tomorrow we begin making sure that everyone is fed, the sick are treated, and everyone warm and comfortable—but neglect the teaching of God's Word—then we will feel good about what we're doing and may even receive the praise of the culture around us, but we will have cut ourselves off from the means God has given us to conform us into the image of his Son. We will have ignored the core mission of the church.

This is why we've put certain things in place. We have deacons to handle important matters that could consume the time of the pastors—like making sure the internet is working, security is handled, the building is maintained, etc. We've hired a few pastors vocationally in order to help

make sure that administrative tasks—like membership interviews, childcare training, and many, many other things—are dealt with. And as the pastor who handles a majority of the preaching on Sunday morning, I am grateful for these things, and feel the weight of ensuring that I am laboring diligently to be able to preach the Word of God to you faithfully on Sundays as we gather. But I want to say to us now, if ever we begin to slip from that commitment of opening the Bible Sunday after Sunday and expositing God’s Word—teaching and applying what it says to us as a church—then we all bear responsibility to step up and ensure that we are not distracted, perhaps by turning to good things but away from the most needed thing.

We have an enemy, and he is like a roaring lion, always looking for an opening to destroy God’s people. May we be sober-minded and alert, praying and laboring to ensure that we walk in holiness and confront sin, count it joy and press on in the face of persecution, and remain committed to proclaiming Christ’s life, death, and resurrection and everything he has given us in his Word—alongside prayer—as the most important ministry of the church. And may we commit afresh to these things now as we come to the table. Amen.