

## ✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

I have a scary story for you today. But if you will take it to heart and cling to Jesus as your Savior, this scary story will help you follow Jesus faithfully.

I called it a story, but these things really happened. Jesus had already died on the cross, paying the full penalty for all sin. The resurrected Jesus already ascended to heaven, like we celebrated last Sunday. Pentecost also has already happened, as we heard about in our reading from Acts 2 this morning. The believers are now regularly talking about Jesus with their friends, relatives, associates and neighbors. Because the Holy Spirit wants to work through the message about Jesus, he has been bringing more and more new believers into the church. There are at least 5,000 male believers (Acts 4:4). I'm guessing there are at least 5,000 female believers and perhaps 10,000 children. The church could be 20,000 people by now.

But some of the believers are hungry and undernourished. "No problem," say the people in the church. They decide to show their faith in Jesus by sharing whatever they have. They all say, "How can I help." No one says, "Let someone else take care of that." In fact, some of the members decide to make sure no one goes hungry. From time to time those who own lands or houses sell them, bring the money from the sales, and put it at the apostles' feet. The attitude of these

believers is awesome: "Please use this to help those in need." No one says, "But don't help so-n-so—he owes me money" or "I don't like how he does things" or "he's the wrong skin color." All the believers are one in heart and mind (see Acts 4:32-35). They love each other enough to work out every little issue so that there are no hurt feelings or divisions among them. 'Having Jesus as Savior' means more to them than their earthly possessions. God was generous with his salvation, so they are generous with their goods. It wasn't their goal, but they are now held in high honor by everyone who is benefitting from their acts of mercy.

It's time to meet a couple of schnooks. <sup>1</sup>*Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property.* <sup>2</sup>*With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.* We don't know much about these two. We reckon they have professed to be believers in Christ. Her name sounds like the precious stone "sapphire," but unfortunately she's no gem. According to the original Greek this couple has a small piece of property. I gather they have noticed the honor other property donors are getting. I imagine them saying to each other something like: "Hey, here's our chance to gain the high opinion of others! All we gotta do is sell our little property."

But it's not good to do a good thing for a sinful reason. There's a problem with their plan. They conspire to perpetrate a fraud on the church. It's not much different from what happens today around our country. Some people do whatever is necessary to get their children into a Christian school, even signing a statement of faith they don't agree with in order to get a break on the tuition. That's fraud too. Ananias and Sapphira are about to learn that it's much better just to be honest.

I would like you to imagine how the look on Ananias' face changes when he lays the money at Peter's feet. He is expecting to hear words of praise and honor. But instead Peter says,  
<sup>3</sup>*"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?"*

I wonder if Ananias wants to say, "Lighten up, Peter. It's just a little bit of fraud! We're not hurting anyone. How can you connect our plan to Satan?" But this was not a common, everyday sin. This took some planning! When we plan to sin, Satan has filled our heart. When you find yourself planning to sin, stop! Resist! Pray! Tell a friend! Don't follow Ananias to Peter's feet. This is not going to turn out well for him.

But I can hear someone asking, "How does this fraud equal 'lying to the Holy

Spirit'?" Think of it this way: the Holy Spirit works saving faith in us. He also works in us a sense of being one in heart and mind with other believers. He leads us to help others because of Jesus. We don't take credit for our good works. We give the glory to God for working good in us. But what did Ananias do? He tries to pass off his gift as one that the Holy Spirit has prompted when in fact Satan inspired his gift as a way for Ananias to gain honor. Satan likes it when we forget about passages like, "*Do it all for the glory of God*" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Listen to the indictment. "*The money you received for the land: <sup>4</sup>Didn't it belong to you before it was sold?*" Ananias, you had a choice: you could keep the land or sell it. God did not require you to sell your land for the good of others. *And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?* You had another choice: you could keep all the money for yourself, or you could give it all for the hungry, or you could give part of the money. Generosity is not compulsory, but honesty always is!  
<sup>4</sup>*What made you think of doing such a thing?* This behavior is entirely out of character for believers in Jesus. *You have not lied to men but to God."*

What we have here is a classic case of hypocrisy: using God's name to cover up an unbelieving heart, like the father of one of my friends. He joined a church choir. My friend said, "But, Dad! You're an atheist." The father replied, "Yeah,

but they don't know that, and I like singing in a choir." In Luther's Small Catechism he refers to this sin as "deceiving by God's name." Let's review that part of the Catechism now. The Second Commandment. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. What does this mean? We should fear and love God that we do not use his name to curse, swear, lie or deceive, or use witchcraft, but call upon God's name in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.

This is a really dangerous sin because of who the Holy Spirit is. Peter told Ananias: <sup>3</sup>"*You have lied to the Holy Spirit.*" And in the next verse Peter says, <sup>4</sup>"*You have not lied to men but to God.*" In other words, the Holy Spirit is God, along with the Father and the Son.

Do you grasp how dangerous it is to lie to the Holy Spirit? <sup>5</sup>*When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died.* Oh, my! The last words Ananias heard were words of divine judgment. He appears to have had no time to repent. The lesson here is that God is really serious about sin. Just because you didn't get struck by lightning when you did that one sin, doesn't mean you got away with it. No one gets away with sin forever.

But in this case it served God's purposes to strike down Ananias quickly. Can you see what God was trying to do? Luke reports the outcome:

<sup>5</sup>"*Great fear seized all who heard what had happened.*" Think about it. How long would it have taken for Ananias' hypocrisy to come out? The truth always comes out, sooner or later. Hypocrisy had invaded the church. At this critical time, it was important to stop it dead in its tracks. The New Testament was not yet written down, so the only thing that unbelievers could read about God was the lives of the believers. Think what would have happened if hypocrisy or any sin had been allowed. The witness of the Christians would have lost its effectiveness. Unbelievers could look at the lives of those Christians and say, "Wait a minute! What benefit is there in becoming like you? You're no better for knowing Jesus, as far as I have seen lately. You haven't reconciled with your fellow church member. You drop the F-bomb and shoot off GD missiles and pepper your speech with OMG, as if the name of your God means nothing special to you. You talk to others (or about them) with disdain and disrespect. You let yourself stay angry, as if that ever improved a situation. You just signed your tax return under penalties of perjury, even though you did not report all your income. And when was the last time you tried to share your faith with anyone?"

What a lesson! God doesn't want us to let any sin stay in our heart, not

hypocrisy, not lust, not rebellion. Let's never excuse behavior God says is wrong. Let's never cover up an evil heart while doing good for others to see. It did not turn out well for Ananias. <sup>6</sup>*Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.* Scary story, indeed!

Now it's Sapphira's turn. <sup>7</sup>*About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.* <sup>8</sup>*Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"* Picture Peter pointing to a stack of coins. Imagine Sapphira thinking: "Uh-oh. My gift must be under suspicion." Peter's question goes right to the core of the sin. It's perfectly okay for them to keep some of the money for themselves. Here's her chance! Will she repent or tell a deliberate lie?

<sup>8</sup>*"Yes," she said, "that is the price."* O Sapphira, what happened to your conscience? <sup>9</sup>*"How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? How could you try to pass off your act as something prompted by the Holy Spirit?"* <sup>9</sup>*Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."* <sup>10</sup>*At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.*

Did anyone turn away from the Lord for how he treated Ananias and Sapphira? No. The early church benefitted by the judgment God poured out on this couple. <sup>11</sup>*Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.* Believers and unbelievers learned that God expects everyone to tell the truth. The sudden, unnatural death of this couple made clear to everyone that this was God's judgment, not Peter's. What a terrible outcome awaits those who let Satan take over their heart and give themselves over to a sin while still pretending to be just fine with God! Stop! Resist! Tell a trustworthy friend what you're struggling with! There is no sin you confess which can keep you out of heaven. If you're still alive, you have time. Repent today. Ask someone for help so you don't repeat the sin. It's quite the spiritual advantage when you know someone is going to ask you, "Hey, how you doing against that sin? Have you given in to it lately?" As long as you are struggling against a sin and not excusing it, Jesus won't let you go, and neither will this church. 1 John 1:7: *"The blood of Jesus, [God's] Son, purifies us from all sin."* There's a place here for every sinner. Jesus himself said (John 6:37), *"Whoever comes to me I will never drive away."*