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Acts: The Impossible Church  
Acts 4:32-37  

As one PURSUING GOD’S CALL into the MINISTRY, Pastor Jim has asked me to preach this morning from ACTS 4:32-37.

Let’s stand and read that text together.

Acts 4:32-37  

“Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 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.”

Let us pray.

“Once again our Father God, through the strength and power of the Holy Spirit, we humble our hearts before YOU. Because we know that by our very nature we do not receive the things of the Spirit . . . they are foolishness to us. It is always AND only, a result of YOUR grace redeeming us that our eyes will be opened to understand the truth of Your Word. We pray that in these moments of study YOU will stir our hearts, fuel our minds, and channel our wills into the pathway of obedience. For we pray in Jesus name and for His sake. Amen”

Before every sermon, you see on the screen up here, the TITLE of the SERMON. So, before we preach, we are asked to provide the TITLE of the sermon in advance. To boil the sermon down into a few words is one of the more difficult tasks in sermon preparation, but it is crucial step. So if I could boil my sermon down into THREE words it would be: THE IMPOSSIBLE CHURCH.

AND I would ask you to remember that title as we go forward into our text this morning.

In the text we're looking at today, we witness an extraordinary moment of calm amidst some raging conflict. It’s the moment in Acts where Luke—the author—is going to call a timeout from all of the CONFLICT of the STORY and offer us a picture of PERFECT PEACE and PERFECT UNITY in the church.

THIS is a picture OF A GEM, a JEWEL, so rare—just 5 verses long—that once it’s over, it is never seen anywhere again in Scripture, or for that matter, in the entire history of the Christian Church.

And as we walk together through the sermon today, I want you ask one question:

Why is THIS RARE PICTURE OF THE CHURCH so important to Luke, that he STOPS the action and the flow of the story JUST so we could take a look?
Why does LUKE want us to do that?

STORY IS CONFLICT

TO BEGIN: let’s remember, that LUKE is telling a story. ACTS is a story, and it’s a captivating story.

WHAT IS STORY?

There’s pretty good chance that, this summer, you will go on vacation and pick up a story to read. And we want it to be a good STORY. And there is a lot of planning on the Author’s Part to make the story dramatic: fiction or non-fiction, stories need drama.
And we all have these stories. So if you were going to write a story—maybe the story of your life, a memoir—or your first novel . . . there is one piece of writing advice that every story-writer will give: In fact, it is called the cardinal rule of writing:

If there is no conflict, there is no story.

The first time my wife, Julie, and I met, I was the Store Manager of a Christian Bookstore chain out in Independence. She was coming up from one of our stores in Austin, TX to interview for an open position in my store. I had only talked with Julie on the phone and she has a deeper cast to her voice so on the phone, I pictured a school-marm in a bun. So it’s a several minutes before the interview and I’m waiting for the School-Marm to come in and while I am waiting, I see another customer come in, a beautiful woman and when she smiled, I felt the thunderbolt hit! I want to meet this woman that just walked in to the store, but I can’t because of the School-Marm coming for the interview.

CONFLICT! GOOD STORIES HAVE CONFLICT.

So, after a bit, one of the workers comes up and announces that the candidate had arrived for her interview. [And I think you know where this is going!] I walk out to meet the School-Marm, and my jaw dropped! It was the beautiful woman that had come in earlier. MORE CONFLICT!

That’s how Julie and I met, 13 years ago, and it is story we laugh and tell even to this day. And you have those same stores—and if they are the stories you tell over and over again, it’s because the story has elements of CONFLICT that drive the narrative.

THE BIBLE is a STORY of CONTINUAL CONFLICT, a long chain of “edge-of-your-seat” CONFLICT from GENESIS all the way to the Book of REVELATION.

In EXODUS, we see the conflict between MOSES V. PHAROAH, but it’s really a showdown between GOD V. Pharaoh.

God says: “Let my people Go!” Pharaoh says, “NO!”

God sends the plagues, Pharaoh keeps refusing! CONFLICT.

In the final showdown, (EXODUS 4:23), when God warns PHAROAH one last time, GOD changes HIS wording. Instead of “Let my PEOPLE go!” GOD says, “LET MY SON GO!” And this time, when Pharaoh refuses, God sends the Plague of the 1st Born Sons.

AMAZING, DRAMATIC CONFLICT!

AND THE BOOK OF ACTS is no exception! ACTS is a story of GREAT CONFLICT, one conflict after another.

That is, UNTIL, you come to our text this morning.

/CONFLICT BEFORE /AND CONFLICT AFTER / BUT THERE is NO CONFLICT HERE.

And that’s the odd thing about our text:

Luke stops the story of ACTS to insert this beautiful, idyllic picture of the Christian Church. THE CHURCH AT PERFECT PEACE, EXISTING IN PERFECT UNITY.

THE contrast is undeniable.
So It is OBVIOUS that LUKE wants us to stop and to look.

Two Potential Misreads

Before we can look at what LUKE is showing to us correctly, we need to clear up a couple of issues that have resulted in people misreading ACT 4:32-37:

THE FIRST WAY TO MISREAD OUR TEXT IS TO BELIEVE IT HAS SOMEHOW BEEN KNOCKED OUT OF PLACE.

That it should be part of CH 5, the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Why isn’t it? That’s the first odd thing.
1. THE IMPOSSIBLE CHURCH IS NOT CHAPTER 5

There is no question that our text this morning sets up what is coming in CHAPTER 5.

BUT you and I KNOW that the CHAPTER DIVISIONS of the BIBLE WERE INSERTED by the CHURCH later. And before I get carried away, isn’t it possible that whoever inserted the CHAPTERS, maybe they got it wrong here.

Isn’t it possible that LUKE ORIGINALLY MEANT for our passage to be part of ACTS 5? That is, be part of the story that is coming up? DID we divide the Bible incorrectly here?

If we did, then there’s nothing all that special about our text.
But if we didn’t get it wrong, then LUKE is showing to us something very significant.

So which is it? THANKFULLY, we can tell, and let me show you how we can tell.

Take a look at this picture of our text from a BIBLE. I admit, there are times I wonder about that guy who divided the Bible into Chapters and Verses.

But FAR more important than CHAPTER DIVISION are these section HEADINGS.

THE CHAPTERS AND VERSES in the BIBLE are divided so they could be used in the liturgy of the church, and facilitate public readings of SCRIPTURE. So, at times, the CHPT/VRS DIVISION can seem a bit arbitrary.

BUT NOT the SECTION HEADINGS. Always pay attention to SECTION HEADINGS. THESE DIVISIONS COME right out of the ORIGINAL GREEK GRAMMAR of the text.

Now, if you look at the first red dot, LUKE did not write the heading: “THEY HAD EVERYTHING IN COMMON,” but in the GRAMMAR of his original Greek, he BOLDLY signals that he is now starting a new section.

Then, if you look at the second red dot, AGAUB LUKE boldly signals that a new section begins. And most Bibles title that HEADING “Ananias and Sapphira.”

THE POINT IS: LUKE KNOWS WHAT HE IS DOING.

So we must conclude that when LUKE signals to us, through HIS GRAMMAR, that he has set this passage set aside, he means for it to be considered as a SINGLE THOUGHT UNIT. But why? THERE MUST be something about THIS TEXT that he wants us to see before we go any further in the story.

2. LUKE IS NOT MORALIZING THE TEXT

THE SECOND WAY TO MISREAD OUR TEXT, IS TO USE IT AS A MIRROR: as a PICTURE OF WHAT WE “ought” TO LOOK LIKE, if we are really Christians!

How great it would be if this was only a theoretical concern!

When I was working at my first Christian Store in St. Louis, the police found a man with several of our BIBLES that had been stolen. [You wouldn’t think it, but the TOP theft item in a Christian Store is BIBLES!] The man, however, defended his actions using the ACTS 4 defense: that if we were Christians, we would give him these Bibles.

Now, this is a somewhat humorous story, but I’m afraid it gets worse.

Go to YOUTUBE and watch some of the sermons on our text, and you will see a fair number of preachers use this PICTURE of the TEXT as MIRROR, especially when they talk about giving.

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BUT DON’T WORRY: Luke is not doing this, he is not chastising us. Frankly, Luke seems to be just as amazed at this GROUP OF BELIEVERS as we are.

And the person who very likely told LUKE about these EARLY BELIEVERS was the Apostle Paul—Paul was here and would have seen this, and LUKE and PAUL traveled and worked together years before LUKE wrote ACTS. My guess is, even PAUL stood in amazement at the PICTURE OF THESE EARLY BELIEVERS.

ALMOST ALL of PAUL’S letters are drastic interventions to churches that have COMPLETELY gone off the rails. REM: PAUL, “You foolish Galatians, who bewitched you?”

Like you and me, AND LUKE, AND PAUL—none of us have seen a group of believers quite like the BELIEVERS we are looking at this morning in our text—and it amazes all of us! LUKE, then, is not using this text to say, “THIS is WHAT YOU and I OUGHT TO DO!”

LUKE is not showing to us a picture of what we are supposed to be or do, but who we are already.

Anywhere that SCRIPTURE gives to us a description of WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST, it is clear that such a beautiful creation is by God’s Grace alone, and for HIS Glory Alone.

It’s never because we have managed to do something on our own.

Consider the Beatitudes, many people read the BEATITUDES are tempted to read “Blessed are the MEEK…” and then say, “man, I had better work on my meekness!” Or they read, “BLESSED are the PEACEMAKERS,” and so check into an ANGER MANAGEMENT class.

The Beatitudes are descriptive, they are not prescriptive:

The Beatitudes” in Matthew 5 also show us not what we are to do, but who we are already.

NO WONDER Luke can hold this picture up to us in AMAZEMENT; we are seeing the UNITY and PEACE in CHRIST that, by the GRACIOUS GIFT of the Holy Spirit, we already have as believers.

And that is ever and only the WORK of the HOLY SPIRIT that we would have such a tremendous outpouring of the PEACE / UNITY / and LOVE.

It is the HOLY SPIRIT who changes the TRUE BELIEVER’S HEART into the picture we see here in ACTS 4.

AND it’s the POWER of CHANGE that you and I, and Colonial, are seeing everyday.

Because we can only and ever do anything Christ-like and God-pleasing by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives and at work in the life of the Church.

The moment you and I try to shoulder this load on our own—we’re in trouble.

When WE try to BECOME this better person or better Christian based on CHECKLISTS and GOOD BEHAVIOR, the paradox is, we’ll move farther and farther away from that.

Any endeavor to please God, initiated by human will, is going to fail. Only the endeavors that are begun and sustained by the Holy Spirit will ever succeed or last.

So, in our text this morning, ALL LUKE IS ASKING US TO DO is to remember, WHO WE ARE ALREADY, IN CHRIST.

IF we know that now, if we can hang on to that, THEN we can ask the hard question:

What if our lives do not resemble the lives of these EARLY BELIEVERS in Acts 4? Should we be concerned?

First, let our concern be appropriate. If we are comparing our actions to the actions of this IMPOSSIBLY
PERFECT picture of believers, then that is not appropriate, because we are still focused on their external actions. NOT THEIR CHANGED HEARTS!

BUT it is APPROPRIATE to harbor some concern if we find that our Christian life is lackluster, if we are not NATURALLY and JOYFULLY evidencing some outpouring of WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST.

Luke has isolated this brief moment in time, in the Church, to show us that this PICTURE is something IMPOSSIBLE for any of us to attain by our own effort:

Listen to what he writes in V. 33 “With great power the apostles were giving out their eye-witness testimony of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace fell down upon them all.”

Note the PASSIVE VOICE: “Great Power” and “Great Grace” fell down upon them. They did not DO something, the HOLY SPIRIT did something to THEM!

But is that SAME HOLY SPIRIT at work in our lives in the same way as for THIS GROUP of BELIEVERS?

Absolutely! But LUKE has condensed this PICTURE into only 5 verses; but we are watching the HOLY SPIRIT at work the entire length of our lives. (PAUSE)

Now you won’t tell it by looking at me today, but long ago, I was a HEAVY METAL DJ with a SATURDAY NIGHT show: The Revelation Rock and Roll Saturday Night. After my set was done I hopped on my motorcycle and went to whatever party I was invited to. But then, one day, I was invited to a different kind of party, it was thing at some church called a youth group. Never heard of it. I knew I was too old for that scene, but hey—I was DJ Jammin Jeff (don’t laugh) and the kids in that group probably knew who I was anyway. [I had such a big head back then]. So I went. And they didn’t JUDGE me. Okay that was weird. It was fun. So I went back. They thought it was cool I was coming back. Then after a while, I sort of wanted to keep going back.

And then something started to happen. And I didn’t even realize it at the time, and I can see it only looking back, that the HOLY SPIRIT was POWERFULLY at work in my life, and with Great Grace and Great Power. Did I notice? Not really.

Did I look anything like that church in ACTS 4? Not even close!

But when we are given a NEW HEART in CHRIST, change happens over time, and we really begin to say, wow, you know, I do want my life to have that kind of joy, that kind of natural outpouring. We don’t want to robotically mimic actions, we want the real deal, we want a Christian life marked by that “Great Power” and “Great Grace.”

So what’s holding us back? What was holding me back? And our text this morning can help us locate THREE issues that do hold us back:

- A HEART ISSUE,
- A MAGNIFICATION ISSUE,
- Or, A DEATH ISSUE.

1. IT’S A HEART ISSUE

Let’s begin with the HEART ISSUE.

READ V. 32 “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.”

The natural response from those who had wealth was to count THE WORTH OF their earthly possessions as nothing compared to helping their Christian brother and sister.
There is only one way that such a thing can work itself into our hearts: SOMETHING greater than our fields, our homes, our possessions, and even our lives, has to have entered our hearts instead.

How might this have happened for these Early Believers? These people lived with the knowledge that, in the darkness of their hearts, in their sin, they had put the long-awaited Messiah on the cross and killed Him.

AND YET, AND YET, when they had realized what they had done, they were mortified at their sin and in great anguish cried out to the APOSTLES, "BROTHERS! What must we do?"

And do you remember back in Acts 2, what the APOSTLES said?

Acts 2:38, “And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”

When was the last time our sin had us cry out in ANGUISH to the LORD? When was the last time we risked losing someone so important to us, that we would give up house, home, job and life-as-we-know it, to save them?

FOR OUR BELIEVERS in ACTS 4, this was present-tense reality that RULED their hearts.

FOR THEM IT WAS:

- death to self
- death to the world,
- and death to the dark and corrupting wisdom of their world.

Think of Baptism. We are immersed in the water. As we go under, that is “US” dying to the OLD HEART, dying to LIFE AS KNEW IT. And as we rise from the Baptismal waters—that is “US” rising to NEW LIFE in CHRIST—just as Christ rose from the dead!

Paul writes in Romans 6:4. “We were buried therefore with [JESUS] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

“That we too might walk in the newness of life.”

The picture LUKE gives to us in ACTS 4, is a picture of people walking in NEW LIFE.

So if we are struggling with the ABSENCE of great power and great grace in our CHRISTIAN lives, could it be we have forgotten the high cost of redemption? That we have forgotten our BAPTISM? We must examine our hearts.

2. IT’S A MAGNIFICATION ISSUE

SECOND, If our lives do not enjoy the natural outpouring of a NEW LIFE IN CHRIST—it could be a magnification issue.

READ V. 33 “And with Great Power the apostles were giving their eye-witness testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

The ACTS 4 believers proclaimed with the APOSTLES, the Risen Christ; they magnified their SAVIOR.

Read Psalm 34:3 “Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!”

To magnify Christ is to exalt GOD ABOVE ALL OTHER THINGS. It’s WORSHIP!

We may desire to magnify Christ, but as long as we continue to magnify anything other than Christ, we do not magnify Christ at all. It’s what I heard seminary professor say recently: "The Lord is the Lord of all, or He is the Lord of nothing at all."

If we magnify—lift up to behold to behold in praise—anything or anyone in our lives other than Christ we have NOT magnified Christ at all.

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Could it be that’s the reason you and I may struggle? Is there something or someone other than CHRIST at the center of your life?

3. IT’S A DYING ISSUE

Third, If our lives do not enjoy the natural outpouring of a NEW LIFE IN CHRIST--it could be DYING ISSUE.

We read in James 3:16, “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.”

In 1517 Martin Luther, the great reformer, nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, (thus launching the Reformation). Luther’s 95 theses were 95 corrections where the CHURCH had moved away from HOLY SCRIPTURE. And the NUMBER 1 THESIS on his List was REPENTANCE.

Luther wrote: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said ‘REPENT,’ he willed that the whole life of a believer should be [one marked by continual] repentance.”

REPENTANCE is the daily act of killing the self. It is a daily—sometimes hourly—death to our egos, our pride, and our self-centeredness.

John Calvin observes, “Our hearts are idol-making factories.”

Give our sinful hearts an INCH—and they will take a MILE. These ‘idol-making’ hearts of ours seek constantly to unseat Christ from HIS rightful place as KING of our NEW LIFE, and put itself on the THRONE.

So, if our lives are missing the natural outpouring of Great Power and Great Grace, are we sure that we have driven the knife into our sinful hearts today? Have we repented? Have we died to the world—or does the world and its dark wisdom still have sway in our lives?

We must, then, examine our lives in these THREE areas.

The Holy Spirit never forces us to conform to ACTS 4 Christianity. BUT NEITHER WILL our loving and gracious Lord JESUS let us languish in the rancid quagmire of

- A Heart Problem
- A Magnification Problem
- Or, a Dying to Self problem

Our LORD loves us too much for that, and paid too high a price to not COMFORT us with the HOLY SPIRIT. We desire to have the natural outpouring of GREAT POWER and GREAT GRACE—so what do we do?

We REMEMBER WHO WE ARE ALREADY, that is why LUKE is offering this IMPOSSIBLY WONDERFUL picture of the ACTS 4 Church! Then, daily, we remember what The APOSTLE PAUL wisely and graciously instructs the Corinthian Church:

1 Corinthians 11:28, “Let a person examine himself then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”

All of the instructions are right here. To remember who we are already in THE BODY OF CHRIST, IT IS HIS BODY. And Paul says we are to examine our lives:

1. Let us: EXAMINE OUR HEARTS—
   Do we remember the cost of Christ’s sacrifice for us?

2. Let us: EXAMINE WHAT and WHO we are Magnifying—
   Are we lifting up and exalting anything or anyone BUT OUR LORD JESUS?
3. Let us: EXAMINE What should be put to death.
   Are we repenting daily—hourly—for the sin in our lives?

When we spot the issue, and TURN AWAY from the issue, JESUS if faithful and will forgive our sins; and The Holy Spirit is faithful and will restore us, and in RESPONSE to this GREAT GRACE and GREAT POWER, PERFECT PEACE, PERFECT UNITY, and PERFECT LOVE will be the NATURAL OUTFLOW in our lives just as it was in the ACTS 4 CHURCH.

That is the reason Luke gives to us the picture of the IMPOSSIBLE CHURCH. It is always going to be IMPOSSIBLE for us, but with GOD—ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE.

And IF we can see this in ACTS 4, then we are ready to move into Chapter 5.

And that’s where Pastor Jim will take us next week.