

## Acts 5:12-16

The incident of Ananias cast gloom over the whole community. Great fear filled the hearts of friend and foe. Men felt as if they were playing with dynamite. The severity of the incident placed God at the center of things.

We certainly would not regard fear as the highest motive for Christian life and service. Is God a terror from Whom we must flee? No, but when we lose the sense of His justice, we lose much. When men cease to be afraid to do wrong they have gone a long way toward their undoing. When Christianity is reduced to a thou-shalt-not-be-punished philosophy, it ceases to be effective.

One of the weaknesses of our age is that so many overlook the justice of God. He will forgive the penitent, but He will also punish the impenitent. It is the highest hope and aim of some of the critics of Christianity to eliminate the teachings of hell and eternal punishment from the Scriptures. They want a God Who will permit them to live as they please and to go their evil ways unrestrained, and Who, at last, will save them from their just punishment. When men cease to have regard for the justice of God they become bold and daring in their wickedness. Fear is not the highest motive, but it often leads to better motives. Without some sense of fear, it is doubtful that any of us would begin to think seriously about our way of life.

In the matter of church membership, subtraction is often strength. If Ananias and Sapphira had been allowed to remain in the membership of that early church, this portion of God's Word would never have been written, and winter, instead of summer, would have settled down on the life of the church. The outflow of judgment is often the preparation for the inflow of grace. Note the elements which entered into the rich experience in the history of the church: Fear (11), Harmony (12b), Reverence (13b), Faith (14), and Works (12a, 15, 16).

The early days of Christianity were days of many miracles. They were a necessity then, for the unbelieving world must be convinced of the power and presence of God. The miracle was the credential of the church. The critical public could kill the worker, but it could not answer or explain the miracle away.

There have always been signs and wonders. God has not always worked along set lines of operation. To admit the existence of God one must admit the possibility of miracles. What are miracles to the omnipotent God? If God cannot do more than man, if He is measured by human standards and by human understanding, then we do not need Him, for He could not help us, save us, or meet our needs.

God often performs His miracles through human agencies. He saved Noah from the flood by directing him to do a most natural and human thing, to build an ark. He delivered the Jews from Egypt by a human leader. He divided the waters of the Red Sea when Moses smote them with his rod. Christ often worked through human instrumentalities. The apostles often performed miracles, but not of themselves; it was God working through them.

God works through the channels of natural things as well as by miracles. He fed the hungry multitudes by suddenly multiplying the loaves and the fishes; but He feeds us by laws of nature, the soil, the rain, the sun, the germination of life, the laws of physics and chemistry, the labor of the farmer, and the use of his instruments. The miracle of the loaves and the fishes was no more the work of God than is the commonplace loaf on our tables each day. The time element is a small factor with Him.

Men are God's agents of blessings. The physician is a God-honored agent. God could heal suddenly as He often did, and has, but where He healed one suddenly without the use of medicine and physician, He heals thousands by the use of these. But the latter

is none-the-less a work of God.

The scientist discovers hidden truth. He does not create the facts he finds. For countless ages they have waited for some divinely guided person to uncover them. The airplane, the radio, television, and thousands of modern discoveries and inventions have come to light because God guided men in their way. When Morse invented the telegraph, his first message from Washington to Baltimore was, "Behold what God hath wrought!"

God works by man and through man to enlighten the world, to heal the sickness of men, to build a higher civilization, to discover the hidden wealth and hidden secrets of the earth, to harness the forces of nature, and to enrich the world with literature, art, and music. God could do these things apart from man, He has chosen to work through man.

God is always above the man and the miracle. It is fortunate when he takes the credit of his work to himself, when he forgets that it is God working through him. When Peter healed the lame man, he boldly declared that he was not the one who healed him, but that it was God who did it. When John the Baptist stirred the land by his preaching, he said, "I am the voice, God is speaking through me, I am nothing but a channel."

Men are in danger of seeing only the miracle and of failing to see the God back of the miracle. What do you see in the sunshine, in the flower, in the landscape, in the starlit heavens? Can you look back of these curtains and see God working through them?

Also used sermon on "Casting Shadows"--Acts 5:15.