



May 10, 2015
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

90 Day Challenge II: The Acts of the Holy Spirit
By the Spirit We Are Shaken
Acts 4

My wife Cyndi and her mom, Peggy, had a wonderful combo Mother's Day/Birthday celebration last week. They flew to Boston to be with our Rachel who just finished year one at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. Rachel had all kinds of surprises planned. She scored some primo tickets to a Red Sox game. Then they drove to Maine and stayed at a village that inspired Cabot Cove in the TV show *Murder She Wrote*. They love that show. Ladies, how many of you love *Murder She Wrote*? Guys? And the food: Cannolis, lobster rolls, lobster macaroni and cheese! I was dripping saliva all over my smart phone. Anyhow, it was a sweet, Hallmark Channel Mother's Day experience.

I saw another image of Mother's Day last week. More Spike TV than Hallmark. Does the name Toya Graham ring a bell? She was the mom in Baltimore who caught her 16 year-old rioting in the streets and gave him a whopping on national TV. Some pundits couldn't help themselves. They criticized her parenting. One suggested she have a calm, mature discussion about the consequences of his misbehavior. Yeah, right. Others of us were saying, "You go mama. You just slap those consequences right into that boy."

Whatever you thought of her methods, anyone who watched that video said, "Whoa! I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that side of motherhood." It was awesome and terrifying... and I guarantee you that young man got the message about what his mom expects. I think he got a little shaken up, don't you? This morning, we see the awesome and terrifying side of the Holy Spirit who shakes up His church.

Okay, how many read Acts 4 in our 90 Day Challenge? Last week we read about Peter healing a lame beggar in the Temple. Chapter 4 opens with them being arrested by the same Jewish leaders who crucified Jesus. They don't like Peter healing people in the name of the Jesus they killed, but they can't argue with results: a lame man is jumping all over the place and thousands have seen it! So, they release them... for now. Then the believers gather to thank God. We pick it up right after that prayer meeting—and I'm going to cheat, because the story actually runs into chapter 5. Listen to this story about how the early Church was shaken by the awesome, and sometimes terrifying, Holy Spirit.

³¹After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. ³²All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. ³³With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. ³⁴There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. ³⁶Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

¹Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ²With 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. ³Then Peter said, "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? ⁴Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." ⁵When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." ⁹Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." ¹⁰At 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. ¹¹Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

¹²The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. ¹³No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

One of the things we are learning in this 90 Day Challenge is how to listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Well, I did that this week and changed my sermon, because the more I read this chapter, the more I felt drawn in a different direction. When we are filled with the spirit, we will be shaken! Turn with me to 4:31. Notice once again, they are gathered in a room for prayer and suddenly, the place is "shaken." How many of you remember the Nisqually earthquake in 2001? Women's Bible Study Fellowship was meeting right here. Suddenly, the organ chimes started

clanging against each other as the building began to shake. (A little Mother's Day side-note: they were told to stay put; that their children were safe. But that wasn't good enough for one mom. She came out of the pew so fast she literally tore the end of the pew right off! Four inch screws pulled right out of oak! Don't get between a mama and her baby!)

Anyhow, once again the early church is shaken—literally—by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Once again they are filled with the Spirit. Remember, I've been telling you that this filling is not something that happens once or twice but again and again. Here's proof! Everyone, including Peter, was together. Everyone was shaken. Everyone was re-filled by the Holy Spirit. Are you asking the Holy Spirit to fill you?

But that wasn't the only way the Spirit was shaking things up. We read in verse 33 that the apostles testified about the resurrection of Jesus with great "power." The Greek word for power is *dunamai*. What does that sound like? Dynamite! The apostles preached like dynamite and shook things up! And then, a very disturbing incident shakes things up. Chapter 5:5. "And great fear seized all who heard what had happened." Again in verse 11: "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."

Do you see how the Holy Spirit is shaking things up? He came at Pentecost. Once-cowardly apostles are suddenly speaking with dynamite power in languages they never learned. Miraculous signs and wonders are being performed. And all of this is being done in the name of the resurrected Jesus. The Holy Spirit has taken Jerusalem by storm. Luke keeps telling of their growth until, finally, there are about 10,000 of them! Everything is up and to the right....

Then something happens that shakes the Church. Let's set the story in context. One of the conspicuous things about this new community was their generosity. Remember, this was a time when the culture couldn't care less about poor people. The Romans used them as slaves, and the Jews viewed poverty as God's judgment. If you were poor, it was because God wasn't happy with you... Jewish karma.

But Jesus reminded his disciples that the real God of the Old Testament wasn't like that. He had compassion on the afflicted, He reached out to the marginalized, He cared for the poor. And the Holy Spirit-filled early Church modeled a community that was generous and compassionate—not to mention power-charged! No wonder they were growing by leaps and bounds.

In fact, people were so inspired they were selling their possessions and giving money to the apostles to share. Just this week, two men approached me to say what the Holy Spirit was laying on their hearts. One has changed his will and named Chapel Hill in his estate. The other just sold a multi-million dollar property and is tithing it to pay down our debt! And notice, they were laying their gifts at the apostles' feet! We tend to want to hide our financial dealings. Imagine such transparency that you exchange checkbook registers with each other! Everyone

knows how you spend your money and how much you give. Wow! One such donor was Barnabas—a guy nicknamed the Son of Encouragement. One of the sweetest men in the Bible; we'll see a more of him later. We first meet Barnabas after he sells a field and gives the money to the apostles for ministry.

Then comes an awe-full Holy Spirit moment that shakes the early church to its core: Ananias and Sapphira. Talk about your feel-good story! Nothing says "Mother's Day" like the account of a husband and wife being struck down by God, right? Even reading this story shakes us as a congregation. It is disturbing, isn't it? But it was obviously a formative part of the early church, and we need to understand what is going on here if we are really to understand the Holy Spirit.

So, first question: Did God strike them down because they didn't give all their money to the apostles? No! I'll tell you, we'd never have to run another stewardship campaign if this happened on a Sunday morning. But it's not about money; Peter makes it clear with his questions to Ananias. "Didn't the land belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?" In other words, "You could have given anything you wanted!" If Ananias and Sapphira had said, "We sold our property and we would like to give half of the proceeds," Peter would have said, "Thanks, and God bless you!" That would have been the end of it.

So if this wasn't about God being greedy and wanting all the money for himself, what was it about? Lying! Lying to the Holy Spirit. Listen to Peter: "How is it that Satan so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit... you have not lied to men but to God!" This is one of those places where we are taught that the Holy Spirit is, in fact, God. Not just a powerful force for good.

Ananias and Sapphira were struck down—not for keeping a portion of their profits but for lying to God. As Peter asked, "What made you think of doing such a thing?" What is the only possible answer? They wanted to pretend to be something they weren't. To get credit for being more generous than they really wanted to be. They watched person after person walk up and lay gifts at the feet of the apostles, and they wanted to join the parade... but for the wrong motives. They wanted credit. They wanted recognition... the bigger the gift, the bigger the honor. But they didn't really want to give away all that money, so they came up with the perfect plan. Hide some, give some and claim they were giving all... and they would be heroes!

Such hypocrisy... but did it deserve a death sentence? Isn't that a little harsh? Well, I guess the Holy Spirit didn't think so. Remember, these were the early days of Christian community. They were creating a culture that would need to sustain them as they took the gospel into the world. In fact, within a few chapters, public opinion is going to swing. Suddenly, they will be persecuted, tortured and even killed—chased out of Jerusalem and into the far corners of the world. There is no room for pretenders—for those who claim to be Christians because it is the popular thing to do—but who, at the first sign of sacrifice or persecution, turn tail and run.

This is exactly what Jesus taught. He didn't talk people into following him. He talked people out of following him. Again and again, Jesus warned people to count the cost of discipleship. In Luke 14 we hear about those who want to be disciples... but not quite, not yet. One needed to inspect a field he had purchased. One needed to test his new oxen. One wanted to go on his honeymoon. And Jesus says, "Fine, do those things, but you can't follow me. It costs to be my disciple. In fact, if you aren't willing to lay down your very life, you cannot be my disciple."

Perhaps the punishment in this case was harsh because the Holy Spirit could not allow the early Church to be polluted by pretense and hypocrisy. They could never accomplish their mission if they were double-minded. When Jews at the foot of Sinai made a golden calf to worship—hedging their bets in case Moses didn't come back down—God struck them down... 3,000 of them. He could not allow idolatry to pollute his people in these early days. Is this story any different? Ananias and Sapphira made an idol of their wealth and of a phony reputation, and God brought judgment upon them. He shook up the whole church so they would understand how much was at stake!

But I think we are shaken by this story for another reason: we get a glimpse of the holiness of God. Our God is awesome in his holiness. We see this in the Old Testament when Moses can't even look straight at God without dying. It is like us staring at the sun; we cannot bear it. It is blinding to our inadequate human eyes. We are so used to thinking about God as compassionate and forgiving—which He is—but He is also awesome and holy and not to be trifled with.

Back to the story of Toya Graham... You know that she held that boy of hers tenderly when he was a baby... that she comforted him when he was a little guy. That is a mother's love. But a mother's love is also wrathful. When she sees her baby doing something that is harmful or disreputable or dishonoring to their name, she is as ready to deliver a slap down as she is a hug.

This is the side of the Holy Spirit revealed here. He is the Spirit who soothes us; Jesus called Him the Comforter. He is the Spirit who empowers as we saw at Pentecost... but he is also the Holy Spirit. When we invite Him to fill us, we are inviting him to change us, to purify us, to make us more like Jesus. And in this chilling story, we see an extreme case where the Spirit brings judgment upon those whose hypocrisy and falsehoods threaten the preciousness of Christian community.

Remember *The Chronicles of Narnia*? In that story, Aslan the lion is the Christ figure. At one point, one of the children asks Mr. Beaver, "Is Aslan safe?" "'Safe,' said Mr. Beaver, '...Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'"

There is a sense in which the Holy Spirit is not entirely safe. He asks us to do risky things. He empowers us to do impossible things. And he lays bare every sin, every

lie, every pretense in our lives. It is a risky thing to invite the Holy Spirit to fill us. He is not safe, but he is good... and he is our king.

The Holy Spirit is coming upon this church in a powerful way. I hear it from many corners. We all feel it. It is a good, exciting, fruitful thing. But we will also be shaken by it. He is going to shake us until we cough up the grudges we prefer to hold. He is going to shake us until we reconcile with our enemies. He is going to shake us until the stingiest among us sees his money as not his money after all. He is going to shake us until every gossip's tongue is quieted. He is going to shake us until every unfaithful spouse repents. He is going to shake us until every person who claims to be a follower of Jesus either flees because they cannot bear the light of truth shone upon their life, or until every pretense is revealed and confessed and forgiven.

At its core, this is a story about hypocrisy. About pretending to be something we are not. Jesus says, "Follow me... offer me everything... offer me all that you are, both good and bad. Don't lie to me. Don't pretend. Just offer it to me... and I will fill you with my Spirit, and I will make you good."