THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY ACTS 4:32-6:15

In the early chapters of Acts we find **divine mathematics** at work: Acts 2:47 reads, "The Lord added to the church daily hose who were being saved." Acts 6:7 tells us, "The Word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly..." In Chapter 2 God adds. In Acts 6 He *multiplies*.

But God never divides. Sadly, it's Christians who do that! Yet in Acts 5, God does do some divine subtraction. For here we find the story of a Christian husband named Ananias, and his wife, Sapphira.

This reminds me of the two pastors chit-chatting about their churches. The one pastor asked, *"Have you had any additions to your church?"* His friend replied, "No, but we have had a few blessed subtractions."

Well, today, we've got a *killer passage* - a sure-fire *knockout* - a *drop-dead Bible Study*. As new believers, Ananias and Sapphira were just *dying* to get into the Bible, and this morning we'll discover how they did it...

We'll pick it up in 4:32, "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common." As we were told in Acts 2 there was such love and unity within the early church that everyone pooled their resources.

Of course, the extent to which they did it may not have been the best financial strategy moving forward. Later, when famine hits Judea the Gentile churches are called on to take up an offering for the believers in Jerusalem. Their abandonment of personal property and wealth had left them unable to weather the storm.

But for the moment, the atmosphere of sharing and love was contagious. God was working powerfully.

Verse 33 tells us, "And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all." I love this description.

Here's a summary statement of life in the early Church great power and great grace!... But great power and great grace are sustained by great purity. It's hypocrisy that can undermine God's blessings on a church, as we're about to see in Chapter 5...

"Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid *them* at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need." In the first church, large and explosive growth had occurred over a short time.

Many of the new converts were Jewish pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for the feast. They had no place to stay and nothing to eat, yet they needed to linger for a few weeks to get grounded in their newfound faith.

That's when wealthier believers came to the rescue. They liquidated their assets to finance the discipleship.

And one such man was named "Joses"... "And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold *it*, and brought the money and laid *it* at the apostles' feet."

The OT Law prohibited the Hebrew tribe of Levi from owning land - their inheritance was to be the Temple service - but apparently, God's Law had been unable to tame Barnabas' heart. He had insisted on ownership.

But what the Law failed to do, the love of Jesus had accomplished. For when Jesus filled his heart, the contents of his wallet weren't that vital to him anymore.

The love of Jesus still turns the *greedy* into *givers*. It turns *misers* into *philanthropists*. Here, Barnabas bows at the apostles' feet. Later he'll become one.

This brings us to Chapter 5, "But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession." Here's the All-American couple living in Jerusalem. In High School, Ananias was captain of the football team. Sapphira was the homecoming queen.

Now they drive a Mercedes to church every Sunday, dress in designer jeans, live on a golf course in the burbs, even have a Bible study meeting in their home.

This storybook couple was the epitome of respectability the poster child for conservative, evangelical success. *They even dabbled in real estate.* And this is what made them feel so uneasy. Their friends at church were getting serious about following Jesus, even to the point of it lightening their wallet.

Here, Mr. and Mrs. Country Club feel threatened. *What happened to moderation?* Believers in Jesus are selling off possessions and pooling their resources...

Ananias and Sapphira liked *playing religion*, but this was real giving and real commitment. They didn't like the encroachment on their lifestyle... *Here was their quandary* they weren't about to relinquish control of their property, but they didn't want to appear stingy or materialistic. And for this couple "image was everything." They couldn't tolerate looking unspiritual...

So here's what they did, verse 2, they "sold a possession, and he kept back *part* of the proceeds, his wife also being aware *of it*, and brought a certain part and laid *it* at the apostles' feet." Remember, God never *required* selling off property and giving it to the church. "Having all things in common" was strictly voluntary.

Neither did God tell Ananias to give **all** the proceeds. He could've donated a portion, *and just said so.* Ananias' sin was to *give part;* then claim to *give all.* He lied! He exaggerated his charity to seem more spiritual.

And he gets busted, "Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back *part* of the price of the land for yourself?" His motive had been to *impress people* rather *please God.*

Apparently, God could've tolerated their *stinginess and materialism*, but what He wouldn't let gain traction in the

church was hypocrisy. These folks cared more about looking good than being real. And if tolerated this attitude would've been a blight on the early church.

Peter grills Ananias in verse 4, "While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

Notice in verse 3 Peter tells Ananias he lied to the Holy Spirit. Now n verse 4 he says Ananias lied to God. Obviously, the Holy Spirit is God. This is one of many biblical proof texts affirming the deity of the Holy Spirit.

"Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last." Here's a genuine case of being "slain in the Spirit." *And I'm sure none of us would want to share Ananias' fate.* God struck down a church member, and Ananias took his final, dying gasp of air.

"So **great fear** came upon all those who heard these things." I'm sure it did. "And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried *him* out, and buried *him.*"

In ancient Israel, corpses were disposed of almost immediately. No need to risk a stench or the spread of disease. They didn't even notify the wife or next of kin.

I mentioned earlier "great grace" and "great power" were cornerstone characteristics in the early church.

But there was one more... "great fear." Church in the book of Acts was serious business. Hypocrites who went to church left either repentant or in a body bag. Play at religion - be a poser - *claim to be more than you really be -* and God would take issue with you...

And the neighborhood respected the high standard.

Realize Satan is sneaky. In Acts 4 he tries to silence the church with threats and intimidation. But the disciples dropped to their knees - praying for boldness.

Now in Acts 5, Satan tries a different tactic. *Intimidation* failed, so now he tries *infiltration*. He tries to dilute their devotion. He contaminates the church with hypocrisy. If he can't beat us; then he joins us.

But Peter sees through Ananias, *"why has Satan filled your heart?"* Satan is the author of this deception.

Today, weak-kneed saints will question God's severity... was it really necessary to deal so harshly?

Imagine, God using the same standard today. Matt would lead us, "All to Jesus I surrender..." and church-folk would start dropping like flies! Wages would need to send a fleet of hearses to haul off the bodies.

Whenever God launches a new movement He uses a flurry of miracles to authenticate its genuineness. At the dawning of the church, it was a rushing mighty wind, flames of fire, the healing of a lame man - but then God deals harshly to preserve the work's integrity.

Recall God followed the same pattern when Israel entered the Promised Land. He worked miraculously at Jericho, but at the next battle, Ai, Achan's hidden sin cost them a devastating defeat. He judged Achan to rid the camp of hypocrisy. *This is* what God does here...

He wants the Church both then and now, to adhere to the priority He places on purity. Spiritual pride, and deceit, and two-faced spirituality are sins that will quench the Holy Spirit and short-circuit God's work.

Verse 7, "Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened."

She'd probably been shopping at the mall. But she's in on the duplicity. Verse 2 calls her a co-conspirator.

"And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much."

Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Notice her sin - *she "test(ed) the Spirit of the Lord"* - she challenged God's omniscience and discernment. The fact she lied and thought she could get away with it was an insult to the Holy Spirit. You can't hide the truth from Almighty God.

I read of a restaurant in New York City that has built its business on hypocrisy. Husbands bring their wives, and boyfriends their girlfriends. Couples get seated and are handed a menu. But what the girl doesn't know is the prices in her menu are triple the cost of the prices in the guy's menu... So when he leans in and tells her to order whatever she wants, the girl is deceptively impressed. Yet this is a dangerous ruse! For when the lady finds out the truth it can backfire! As it does here. God knew this couple's motive from the start. Sapphira should've come clean, instead...

Verse 10, "Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying *her* out, buried *her* by her husband." The golden couple was buried in adjacent plots. They died in shame as a warning to the Church.

"So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things. And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly." For a time, this slowed the church' growth rate, *but it intensified their respect.* Folks realized that God takes faith seriously.

The Church in all eras needs to be careful about overlooking the importance of personal holiness. When we lower the bar we lose the public's respect. All churches need to foster *"great grace"* and *"great fear."*

But it didn't take long for the Church to grow again. Verse 14, "And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women..."

The Law of the Vineyard applies to churches - as to grapes. Rather than *more foliage*, the vinedresser is after *more fruit*. The same applies to church life.

At times, a church has folks hanging on who aren't bearing fruit. They're hypocrites. They're contentious or bitter. And

there comes a point when God lops the bad apples... Yet after Mr. and Mrs. Ananias *"dropped out"* a new surge of folks *came in.* The Church grew again.

"So that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid *them* on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed." There was a surge of people, and of power!

We learn in Acts that purity and power go hand-in-hand. As soon as God rids the camp of sin, the camp erupts with more people and power. Miracles occur... The sick are healed... Demoniacs are delivered...

And this passage shows how far Peter has come. A few months earlier Pete was sitting in the shadows, weeping bitterly that he denied Jesus - afraid of arrest.

Now he's so associated with the living Lord people have connected his shadow with supernatural healing.

I don't believe there was anything miraculous about Peter's shadow, but people were healed because it triggered their faith. Faith can need a point of release.

Faith is often nebulous and vague until it has a focus. This is why we practice the laying on of hands when we pray. It's a rallying point for faith. Peter's shadow brought shape and substance to the people's faith. Not surprisingly people were healed... by faith. Verse 17 "Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees) (remember the Pharisees were Jesus' enemies, the Sadducees opposed the Church), and they were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison."

This was a different form of the laying on of hands.

"But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life." And when they heard *that*, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught." First, note the angel calls Christianity *"this life."* Christianity is a lifestyle, not just doctrine. It impacts how we live life.

Notice too, the angel says preach in the temple. And the very next morning the apostles report for duty.

Here's a quiz for you geography buffs - "What's the world's largest nation?" Answer: "Procrastination."

More people live there than in any other state. When God gives orders don't *hesitate*... don't *procrastinate*... just *activate!* The disciples obeyed the next morning.

"But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought." Obviously, they were unaware of *the angel's early release program.* "But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, saying, "Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one

inside!" Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. So one came and told them, saying, "Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" *Surprise!* "Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. And when they had brought them, they set *them* before the council." This *"council"* was the Jewish Sanhedrin, the highest authority in Judaism - their Supreme Court.

"And the high priest asked them, saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine..."

What a compliment to Peter and the apostles. They had filled their city with the Gospel. This should be our goal to flood our city with the good news of Jesus.

And notice, they also accuse Peter of "intend(ing) to bring this Man's blood on us!" What a short memory they have. Remember when the High Priest asked Pilate to release Barrabas, he had said of Jesus, "His blood be on us and on our children." Peter isn't going to let him forget what he asked for that ominous day.

"But Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men..."

Later in his letter, Peter writes, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man... for this is the will of God..."

Peter was no anarchist. He believed that submission to human authority is a Christian virtue. If we can't submit to the

government, an authority we can see, how will we submit to God, an authority that's invisible?

Peter believed in paying taxes and driving the speed limit. He obeyed civil authority, as long as its demands didn't conflict with God's will. But when that happened, he had a choice - *obey man or God?* And Peter says that's no choice at all - It's always better to obey God!

He preaches to the Sanhedrin in verse 30, "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree." Peter is again, full of boldness!

"Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him." The direr their threats the braver Peter grows. He violates their orders before he even leaves the room. Each time he preaches his life is threatened, yet he remains fearless. "When they heard *this,* they were furious and plotted to kill them."

"Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while." He wants to speak privately...

Jewish sources tell us Rabbi Gamaliel was the preeminent scholar of his day. His contemporaries called him, *"the beauty* of the Law." At his funeral it was said, "the glory of the Law ceased and purity and abstinence died..." Gamaliel was respected by all the Jews, both his fellow Pharisees and rival Sadducees.

As a side note, according to Acts 22:3, one of his most brilliants students was a young Jew from Tarsus, a man named Saul - who later will be renamed Paul.

This Gamaliel "said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about 400, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed." We know little about either Theudas or Judas, but that was Gamaliel's point. They created a stir, yet it was short-lived. It died out.

"And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing, but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it - lest you even be found to fight against God." If this Jesus movement is of man it'll drift into oblivion, but if it's of God you won't be able to defeat it, and who would want to! The Rabbi Gamaliel gave the Sanhedrin some wise and sage advice...

And I wonder what he'd tell us today - 2000 years later now that Christianity has *transformed cultures*, *birthed civilizations*, affected numerous generations, and spread to the four corners of the globe? I'm sure he'd say, this Jesus movement was of God after all! Verse 40, "And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten *them*, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go." Rather than execute the apostles, they roughed them up - had them flogged. It was one more attempt to intimidate them into silence.

And you got to love their reaction. No apostolic pity parties here! "So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name." They treated persecution for Jesus' sake like a medal. It was a badge of honor.

"And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ."

I love how Winston Churchill defined a fanatic. He said, "A fanatic is someone who can't change his mind and won't change the subject." That was the apostles!

How do you stop guys who interpret a beating as a blessing? Throw them in prison and they praise God. Shame them and they take it as an honor. Try to silence them, and they grow more public and vocal.

The disciples recalled Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven..." How do you defeat people who live for heaven's reward? *You don't!*

Chapter 6, "Now in those days, when *the number of* the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the

Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution." Remember the divine math... God adds, He multiplies, even subtracts - but He never divides.

It's the members of the church that stir up division.

I've heard of churches splitting over the color of the carpet, or location of the water cooler - *just trivial stuff.*

Obviously, there are issues worth fighting for, but how often have churches divided over picky, petty matters? Often, it's superficial stuff that gets us off the rails.

This brings us to Acts 6, *the first church squabble.* The Church at Jerusalem had *a breach over bread.*

The dispute erupted over whether the *Greek widows* were getting a fair share of the *groceries*. This conflict was over a *minor matter*, but as these situations often do, it had escalated to *major proportions*.

The word "*Hellenist*" refers to Jews who'd embraced the Greek language and culture. Hebrew purists resented these people. In their eyes they were compromisers. There was a great tension between these two groups.

So when there seemed to be inequities in the distribution of the church's benevolence the Hellenists were quick to call foul and accuse the Hebrews of discrimination. It was an ugly, volatile situation with the potential of permanently thwarting the *rapid expansion* and *righteous harmony* of the infant Church. Disaster was averted because of some wise leadership... Verse 2, "Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables." The problem wasn't being caused by bigotry, but busyness.

The apostles were stretched thin. They were trying to do it all: hammering out sound doctrine, and fighting the Sanhedrin, and discipling new believers - *and now they're to wait on tables?* It was all just too much!

And pastors today face the same dilemma...

Everybody wants a pastor to be there... at the meeting, or wedding, or funeral, or special event, or if a member heads to the hospital, or a teenager gets into trouble, or you have a squabble with your spouse...

People want their email answered... their phone call taken... their invitation accepted... "Pastor, can spare me a few minutes of your time. And oh yea, we need you preparing quality Bible Studies every week!"

I'm not complaining. I'm just saying it gets to be a lot. This is why I won't even mention the burn out rate for pastors. It's astronomical. If a pastor is going to survive he has to learn to say "no" - to prioritize and delegate.

This is what the apostles do in Acts 6. They realize they're the paper jam - the bottleneck - in the life of the church. If they don't get others involved they'll hinder the work they hope to advance. Their priority is clear, *"It is not desirable that we... leave the word of God."*

Realize, the ministry of God's Word should be every pastor's top priority. The Bible calls itself *a fire, a food, a*

sword, a hammer. It's God's revelation to man. Without it the church is hopeless and defenseless.

Long-time coach of the Michigan State Spartans, Duffy Daugherty, once told his team, "Men, when you're playing for the national championship, it's not a matter of life and death. It's more important than that."

That's a sky-high priority, yet that's how every pastor should feel about teaching the Scriptures. From week to week, other needs seem more *urgent* than preparing another Bible study, but in God's wisdom, nothing is more vital for the church's health. The apostles knew this - and to solve the problem, decided to delegate.

Verse 3 "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of *good* reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." This matter was about the "daily distribution." Greek for "distribution" is "diakonos" or literally "deacon." That's why these seven men were considered the Church's first deacons. It's interesting to note the simple leadership structure that existed in the early Church. The apostles or elders led and fed the flock, while the deacons served. Elders were overseers. Deacons were designated doers.

Also notice the high-spiritual qualifications given to the men who passed out lunch to widows. They were, "of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." Realize, the church has no menial jobs. Every task is vital since those we serve are bought by the blood of Jesus. All folks must be treated with love and wisdom.

Churches today often have the wrong focus when it comes to church government. They're rigid in regards to structure, but they compromise on the character of the men who occupy that structure. *We get it backward.* The NT is flexible regarding structure, but unwavering when it comes to a leader's character.

Verse 5 tells us that this decision averted a major schism. "And the saying pleased the whole multitude.

And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip (The next two chapters are about Stephen and Philip), Prochorus (a long time assistant to John, who died a martyr's death), Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch..."

Some teachers identify *"Nicolas"* with the heresy spoken of in Revelation 2-3, "the sin of the Nicolaitans." *"Nico"* means *"ruler"* and *"laos"* means *"people."* Thus, the *Nicolaitans* practiced a bullying type of leadership. They loved to rule over people.

Could it be *"Nicolas"* rebelled against his earlier role? Instead of serving, he craved for control and power?

One other point - later in Acts, elders are appointed by fellow elders. But here the deacons are selected by the church. Peter said, *"seek out from among you..."*

In light of that, it's interesting that all seven deacons chosen had Greek or Hellenistic names. *Remember the problem - the Hellenistic widows felt slighted...*

Thus, the church in Jerusalem chose servants that the perceived victims would be able to trust. Obviously, what was most vital to this church was its unity.

Verse 6, the deacons were "set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem."

The apostles' decision to prioritize God's Word and delegate the simpler tasks, unclogged the bottleneck.

Their decision not to do it all, but pass on ministry to other believers, spawned a new season of growth.

"And a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." In first century Israel, 8000 priests served in the Temple. The Jewish priesthood was limited to one family - the descendants of Aaron. But in Christ, every believer gets in on the priestly action. Each of us has a direct connection to God. We all enter His presence.

The Jewish priests also witnessed the Temple veil being torn when Jesus died. It was a sign. In Christ, the separation between God and man was over. Every believer now has the access of a priest... All of this must've resonated with the priests. Many converted.

Verse 8, "And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people."

It didn't take long for Stephen to go from *table waiter* to *miracle worker*. Apparently, God rewarded Stephen's faithful service with a broader and bolder ministry. He was faithful in a little and God rewarded him with much.

"Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen." The *"Freedmen"* were Jews whose fathers had been Roman slaves. Implied is that they'd won their freedom, and had formed their own synagogue.

For some reason, they had a beef with Stephen.

"And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." They can't refute Stephen, so they make up fake news and hire false accusers. "And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon *him*, seized him, and brought *him* to the council." (The Sanhedrin).

"They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us. And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel." Despite the lies they heard, there was a godly glow about him.

Charles Spurgeon use to say to his students, "Men, when you teach on heaven let there always be a glow on your face, a gleam in your eye, and a grin on your lips... When you

teach on hell, your normal face will do." Apparently, Stephen had a certain glow about him.

It reminds me of Exodus 34 when Moses spent time in the presence of God a visible sheen, or sparkle, or luster lingered and radiated from his countenance.

Call it the *divine shine* or the *Mo glow!* Evidently, God's glory had a similar effect on the face of Stephen.

The similarity between Moses and Stephen should have tipped off the Jews that rather than contradict Moses, Stephen was acting in harmony with him...

We'll study Stephen's testimony in Acts 7...