



## HIGH VOLTAGE GOD

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In the first Mission Impossible movie, a team of secret agents is sent on a job to catch someone who is selling national secrets. There's a traitor who is attacking the U.S. by giving away its military intelligence.

So Ethan Hunt and his team set up a sting operation to catch him. Only something goes terribly wrong and everyone on the team except Ethan dies. He learns afterwards that it wasn't somebody outside the agency they were really looking for – there was a mole on the inside. The whole nature of the fight took on a different tone. Now it wasn't some enemy "out there" – it was a devastating problem in the very heart of the agency.

Last week we saw what the early church did when they were attacked from the outside. We said opposition and road blocks are part of the Christian experience.

But there can also be trouble from within, moles, if you will, working inside the church in a way that undermines what God is doing. This morning we come to one of the most sobering, challenging stories in the whole Bible – the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

### **Acts 4:32-5:11**

*The whole congregation of believers was united as one — one heart, one mind! They didn't even claim ownership of their own possessions. No one said, "That's mine; you can't have it." They shared everything. The apostles gave powerful witness to the resurrection of the Master Jesus, and grace was on all of them.*

*And so it turned out that not a person among them was needy. Those who owned fields or houses sold them and brought the price of the sale to the apostles and made an offering of it. The apostles then distributed it according to each person's need.*

*Joseph, called by the apostles "Barnabas" (which means "Son of Comfort"), a Levite born in Cyprus, sold a field that he owned, brought the money, and made an offering of it to the apostles.*

So far so good, right? This is a wonderful picture of how incredibly selfless everyone was. They are so committed to taking care of each other that they are selling off property to do it.

I was over at Peter and Laura Johnson's house the other night, and their 6 year old, Linnea, was showing me the house floor plan she had designed. She had very thoughtfully built in a place in her parents' room to hide birthday and Christmas presents, which I thought was genius. But what caught my attention was that in each of the bedrooms she had designated a "give away for sure" area – a place to put things you're giving away. That section of the room was almost as big as any other section.

What a great concept – to have built into our lives a space where we are constantly giving things away, where we devote as much room in our hearts and our budgets to sharing as we do to accumulating.

The early church latched on to that concept, and it was powerful. Everybody had what they needed, because nobody kept more than they needed. It was a wonderful time. Things were going great. Then comes one little word. "But..." And the whole scene is turned on its head.

*But a man named Ananias — his wife, Sapphira, conniving in this with him — sold a piece of land, secretly kept part of the price for himself, and then brought the rest to the apostles and made an offering of it.*

*Peter said, "Ananias, how did Satan get you to lie to the Holy Spirit and secretly keep back part of the price of the field? Before you sold it, it was all yours, and after you sold it, the money was yours to do with as you wished. So what got into you to pull a trick like this? You didn't lie to men but to God."*

*Ananias, when he heard those words, fell down dead. That put the fear of God into everyone who heard of it. The younger men went right to work and wrapped him up, then carried him out and buried him.*

*Not more than three hours later, his wife, knowing nothing of what had happened, came in. Peter said, "Tell me, were you given this price for your field?"*

*"Yes," she said, "that price."*

*Peter responded, "What's going on here that you connived to conspire against the Spirit of the Master? The men who buried your husband are at the door, and you're next." No sooner were the words out of his mouth than she also fell down, dead. When the young men returned they found her body. They carried her out and buried her beside her husband.*

*By this time the whole church and, in fact, everyone who heard of these things had a healthy respect for God. They knew God was not to be trifled with.*

The name Ananias means God's mercy and the name Sapphira means beautiful. Mercy and beauty. Could any two people be remembered for something more opposite of their names? This story is about God's judgment. What happens is ugly, not beautiful.

What in the world is going on here? This event is so jarring. It sounds incredibly harsh to our ears. What has happened to the grace and mercy that God was pouring out all over in the first chapters of Acts?

Last week I said that God is not in the business of payback. I firmly believe that. Jesus took all the wrath and punishment of God on himself when he died on that cross. He was our substitute and what he did was complete. There's no need to add more punishment for additional sins.

But then we come to this story, and it sure seems like it's about punishment. It reminds you of stories you find in the Old Testament. Even there, God generally seemed to show more patience, letting people get away with more for longer. This is severe even by Old Testament standards. And in the New Testament, we don't find a single other story this drastic. Ananias and Sapphira are a world unto themselves.

There's a lesson in this story, but apparently, Ananias and Sapphira weren't the ones who were supposed to learn it. They were dead before they could even process what was happening. Luke's recording of it has to mean the lesson is for us – not them. There's something beyond punishment. But what's the lesson?

Damir Minarivic is a 14 year old boy who lives in a small town in North Serbia. Like a lot of teenage boys around the world, Damir plays soccer. This past March, he was kicking his soccer ball down by the train station when he kicked it a little too high and it lodged itself on top of one of the train cars. These commuter trains are a familiar sight all over Eastern Europe. They were nothing intimidating to Damir, so he clambered up on top of the train to retrieve it.

What he had forgotten was that the train was an electric train. What he had forgotten were the big, dangerous cables overhead. As he reached for his soccer ball, he accidentally brushed against one of them. Immediately, 25,000 volts of electric current raced down the wire and into his body. It was an unbelievably strong shock. Doctors say it's a miracle he's even still alive.

Here's a boy who treated the train as if it were something less than it was. It was just something to climb – not a powerful machine. The truth was a shock. All too often we treat God in that same casual way, forgetting who he really is. And we are shocked when he reveals himself. We want God to come near for his good gifts and grace to us, but we don't realize that when he comes, he comes in his holiness. You can't have God be near and not near at the same time, and we can't ask him to be less than God.

The church in Acts has seen some amazing demonstrations of God's nearness. Healings. Fire. Boldness. Wisdom beyond their education. A closeness in the group like they'd never had. God was so present you could feel it.

The more evidence you have of God's power, the more evidence you're going to have of God's holiness. You can't distinguish his actions from his character, and he is holy to the core. We tend to focus on God's love, but the Christian story doesn't make sense without God's holiness. P.T. Forsyth once wrote, "To bring sin home, and to bring grace home, we need that something else should come home which alone gives meaning to both – the holy.

Look, I don't have a clever outline with a long list of points this morning. I have one simple message: God is holy. That is not a truth we spend much time with, because it feels a bit stand-offish and aloof to us, like "holier-than-thou." We think it's an undesirable trait, and it doesn't make us feel closer to God when we hear it.

I want to change the way we hear it, because holiness is so central to God's character. The world holy comes from the same root we get the English words "well" or "whole". God's holiness means he is complete unto himself. It means he's perfect, so he never has to change. It means he's pure. That means that what comes from him can only be the same.

### **James 1:17-18**

*Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.*

God's holiness stands behind his creation of the universe, because a good and perfect world could only come from a good and perfect creator. His holiness enabled him to produce beauty and light. And it is his holiness that compels him to want to make things right between himself and a broken, fallen creation, because anything wrong does not sit well with him.

That's what God being holy means – his own internal perfection and goodness, which gives him a deep desire for everything in the universe to be put back to the way he intended for it to be – good and perfect. A holy God is a champion for all that is good and right.

If God is only defined as love, then sin wouldn't be a problem. He could just easily forgive everyone out of the goodness of his heart. He could look the other way over offenses. It was his holiness that made forgiveness a costly matter. It was God's absolute, incorruptible purity that made sin such a terrible dilemma. How could an untainted God come in contact with tainted humanity without compromising his very nature? It was his holiness as much as his love that sent Jesus to the cross. Salvation is easy for us because it was so costly for Jesus.

We are so grateful for God's grace and forgiveness and love that we can forget the holiness of the one behind it. God has a kind of white hot perfection that sends a 25,000 volt current through sin when it brushes up against him.

It's like the time the Philistines stole the ark of the covenant from Israel, but God's presence in it was so powerful and holy that it was causing all kinds of problems for that pagan country. Statues of their other gods were falling down in front of it. People were getting physically sick because they were keeping God's ark in the god Dagon's temple. Finally, the Philistines said, "This is too much for us. Send it back."

So they did. Then when King David's army went to transport the ark back to Jerusalem, they just put it on an ordinary cart. They didn't pay attention to God's instructions on how to carry it, which was supposed to be on poles. So when the cart hit a pothole and the ark started to slide, someone reached out to catch it. Instantly, that man died, just like Ananias. Nobody was supposed to touch the ark. That was where the glory of God's presence sat, and it was too holy for sinful people to come in contact with.

At first, King David was angry with God. The man had only been trying to help. But then he realized that as a people, they had treated God too casually. They hadn't listened to the warnings about how serious it is to be in God's presence. He is our God who loves us more than anything, but he is still a consuming fire.

The situation with Ananias wasn't exactly the same, but it had a very similar outcome. What do we know about his sin?

Isaac's in algebra this year, and I've been trying to be the good dad and help him with his homework. But as far as I'm concerned, letters and numbers were never really intended to mix. It's not natural. You don't see fractions and decimal points on the spelling test, so why should you see the alphabet on the math test?

About the only thing I remember from algebra is that you have to isolate the variable. If you want to solve the equation and figure out what x is, you have to get x all by itself. When there's a lot going on on a math problem, I can always focus on that.

That's kind of what we have to do with this story. We've got to isolate the variable, which in this case is the nature of the sin Ananias and Sapphira committed. There's so much going on that you really have to chip away to get to the heart of the matter.

You might think at first that this was about the money. Ananias skimmed some off the top before giving the rest to the apostles. That sounds like stealing, which is never a good thing. But Peter made it pretty clear that money wasn't the main issue.

Just because other people were selling their property didn't mean Ananias had to sell his. People were volunteering to do that – not being asked to. You didn't have to cash in all your assets to be a Christian. And Peter told Ananias that. "Wasn't the land yours to begin with?"

Even after it was sold, it would have been fine for Ananias to just give part of it to the church. Peter pointed that out as well. There was plenty of freedom. Give or don't give. You choose what, you choose how much.

But Ananias and Sapphira apparently made a plan to trick the disciples into thinking that they were giving them everything from the sale. They wanted to create the impression that they were being more generous than they really were.

Remember what Acts said about the man named Joseph? He sold a piece of land and presented the money to the apostles. He had a good reputation. He was held up as an example. The disciples even gave him the nickname, Mr. Comfort. Barnabas.

When I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, we had a youth pastor I idolized. His name was Bud. There was an older kid in our youth group named Chip, and Bud called him, "Chippers." "Hey Chippers, how you doin'?" I thought that was awesome. I wanted him to give me a nickname too. I wanted him to call me "Jeffers." That would show everybody that me and Bud were tight.

I don't know what motivated Ananias and Sapphira to lie the way they did. Maybe they wanted nicknames from the apostles. In general, I think they just wanted people to think something was true about them that wasn't. They wanted to be respected and held up as examples and admired. They wanted to look better than they were.

It was that pretending that got them into trouble.

There's a new resort near Missoula, Montana, and people have had to come up with a new word to describe the experience there. They call it "glamping." You first look at the place, and it looks pretty rugged: Tents on wooden poles, lots of trees and mountains, no civilization for miles.

Then you look inside the tent: oil paintings on the walls. Electricity. King-size feather beds. Plush rugs. Private bathrooms with heated slate floors. A butler to greet you when you come back from your day of hiking. You can go home and tell your friends you went on a camping trip, when really you were glamping.

Ananias and Sapphira are glamping. They're trying to pass off what they're doing as something else.

They lied. Obviously, lying is a sin. But they're certainly not the first people to do that. Peter lied, and Jesus forgave him. Surely other disciples fibbed occasionally and weren't struck down for it. What was it about this lie that made it so destructive?

I think Peter gave us a clue when he told Ananias, "You haven't just lied to people. You've lied to God." Paul confirms the seriousness of that offense:

**Galatians 6:7**

*Don't be misled: No one makes a fool of God.*

I'm sure Ananias didn't directly pray to God and say, "No, really, Lord – I only sold the land for this much." He must have lied to God indirectly AS he lied to the people.

Here's why: With the entrance of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, something new is happening: The location of God's resting place on earth is moving from the physical temple to the hearts of his people. God said, "I'm going to pour out my Spirit on people's hearts – young and old, men and women." The church is becoming God's temple, his holy place.

The church, then, represented God. When Ananias and Sapphira lied to the church, they were in effect lying to the Holy Spirit, because he was present in Peter, he was present in the apostles and he was present in all the other Christians. This was something different. This was something new. It was as if at the outset of the church God wanted to make it clear where his holy presence now dwelt, and he used this occasion as an example so people wouldn't treat the church lightly or casually.

Fundamentally, the content of the lie was this: "God, I'm giving you my all." Ananias and Sapphira wanted God to think of them as being whole-hearted, when in fact they were holding something back.

If there's one thing God can't stand, it's phoniness.

**Proverbs 20:23**

*The LORD detests differing weights, and dishonest scales do not please him.*

He can't stand it when people pretend to be one way when they're really something else. A relationship with him has to be built on honesty and integrity. That's what he came to us with. Peter would later write about Jesus and say this:

**1 Peter 2:22**

*He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.*

We can't expect to be Christ's body without reflecting his character. That's why we place such a high value on transparency and authenticity here at New Day – not that we always practice it, but we make it our goal to get rid of the hypocrisy that wants to creep into our lives on every level. We can't move toward holiness if we're pretending we're already there. And that's what hypocrisy is – a false perfection, a fake holiness.

Over 200 years ago, the preacher John Wesley developed a set of accountability questions that his followers would ask themselves every day. Out of all the questions he could start his list with, Wesley chose to ask this:

*Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?*

Are you being honest in your relationship with God? Are you transparent before him? It's easy to pass that one off and say of course. I would never like to God. But then you think of Ananias and realize the connection between God and his people, and you have to ask: Am I being transparent and honest with other Christians? That's where things get sticky.

It is what we hide and cover up that makes us sick. It is our secrets that destroy us.

I want to come back for a moment to the overarching purpose of this story. Is this really about punishment and creating a fear of it in us? Are we supposed to live with integrity so that we won't get zapped? How do we reconcile the story of Ananias and Sapphira with the message of grace? I believe it's by seeing the grace that is in the story that we might miss at first.

For most of my childhood, my family lived on a very busy street just outside of Olympia. It was a slightly rural area with few stop signs or crossroads, so cars would go flying past our house way above the speed limit. We lived right on a blind curve in the road, which made it even more dangerous and the site of several fatal accidents and runover pets. We had a large hedge out front, partly just to block off cars that could go flying off the road.

One day, when my sister and I were playing outside, my two year old brother Jordan, slipped away unnoticed and made his way across the street. The next thing we knew, he was standing by the mail box on the far side of the road.

My mom tore across the street, grabbed his hand and spanked him the whole way home.. I have this image burned in my mind of my dad standing with Jordan by the road, his face looking angry, saying sternly to him, "No! The road is a no no!"

It looked like my baby brother was getting the punishment of a lifetime for what he did. But it wasn't punishment. It was protection. It was pure love that motivated my mom and dad, love at its most urgent and intense level that wanted to stress to their child how important this rule was for his own safety and well being. When kids are small and vulnerable, parents impose strict safety precautions not to limit freedom but to preserve life. That wasn't judgment – that was grace.

If the story in Acts is only about one individual couple, it can come across as harsh and judgmental. But it's way more than that. This is a story about the whole church, a young, vulnerable church. This is a story of a Father, taking extreme measures to preserve life. God didn't want to see his baby church – his new temple -- corrupted and twisted. What sounds angry and intense was motivated by fierce love. He acted swiftly and graciously to protect what mattered most to him. And that is grace at its very best.

God is equally concerned about you. You don't need to worry that he's going to swoop in and strike you dead the next time you lie. But if you've invited Christ into your life, you're the place where his Holy Spirit lives – his HOLY Spirit. His awe inspiring, powerful holy spirit. And God will not abide pretending and falsehood. He does not want to see us corrupted and twisted. He will strike down whatever in us remains that is unholy. You may think what he is doing is punishment, but he is wanting to preserve life.

God can forgive any sin except the ones we pretend don't exist. We think we'll have better standing with God if we try to make it look like we are better, when the opposite is true. It's by admitting our faults and our weaknesses openly to God that we find healing and restoration and the holiness that has eluded us on our own.

What's my motivation for wanting to come close to a God like that? It goes back to the story of the Philistines and the ark of the covenant. Remember that their idols kept falling down in front of God's holiness? Anything we try to put in a place where God belongs is an idol. And we've got some idols that need to fall down.

Some of us have idols this morning, and the sad thing is we are still clinging to them as if they're working for us. But they're not. We cling tightly to being in control, or being good, or financial stability or maintaining an image or keeping things the same, when things really need to change.

But when we come into the holy presence of God, we see that our idols are not giving us what we need. Our secrets don't promise us peace that passes understanding. Our lies have not been a strong tower – they are a prison. Our drive for success and worth has become a burden of shame and guilt.

Only the holy God will satisfy what you are longing for. True freedom will come when we are willing to let our idols fall down in front of him. Come near to God and he will come near to you. It's painful to let go of our idols, but only for a moment.

You might be thinking this morning, "I can't come near to God. Not after today's story. I've done worse than Ananias. I haven't just lied to God. I've defied him. Or I've ignored him. I'm too unholy."

A.W. Tozer once wrote, "We must hide our unholiness in the wounds of Christ...We must take refuge from God in God."

In Jesus, God gave us the only way to be close to him. The Bible says he became sin, so we could become holy. And if God has provided the way, there's nothing more to fear. We take refuge from God in God himself. And as Romans 8 puts it,

### **Romans 8:31**

*What, then shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?*