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A while back I read the true story of a lady who was on a plane returning home from a business trip. The air hostess came around with the evening meal and she accepted it but the man beside her refused. She decided to make polite conversation and so asked him if he was on a special diet or something? "No", he replied, "I'm fasting."

Now the business woman was intrigued and being a Christian and knowing that Christians often fasted she asked him if there was any purpose behind his fast? He replied that he was a member of a Satanist movement and they regularly fasted and prayed against key leaders in the Christian church. He mentioned the names of the people that he was particularly praying against and she realised that many of them were having a particularly tough time in their ministries.

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Now when I heard that story, I was shocked. Imagine Satan targeting key people within the Church in such an organised manner! Imagine his followers going to such lengths to stop God's work! Imagine them being so dedicated to their cause that they would go without food and spend hours and hours in prayer to the Devil that his kingdom may be advanced!

Friends, so often we forget about the Devil. Our society has done a good job in persuading the Church, and our world, that he does not exist. Yet he is real and his chief aim is to keep people away from God's Kingdom. So, you can imagine that when the Church begins to grow that Satan will be particularly active. People are changing sides. They are traitors to his cause. Satan will not lie down without a fight. He comes up with a cunning plan. Firstly to

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### 1. Deceive (verses 1-16)

*"Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> With 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. <sup>3</sup> Then 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?"*

Now isn't it interesting that when Satan wants to attack the Church he starts from within? In fact he starts with two very supportive members of the church. In the very last chapter Barnabas had wonderfully encouraged this fledgling Church by selling a property and laying all the money he got for it at the apostle's feet. But Satan now fills another couple's hearts to do the same thing, but with a twist. They generously hand over the equivalent of hundreds of thousands of dollars of cash but they pretend it is all that they have received rather than some of what they received.

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So, Peter continues his questioning of Ananias. *<sup>4</sup> "Didn'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 just to human beings but to God."* <sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard

*this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup> Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.”*

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You get it? If they had just said, we have sold this property and we have a few financial needs ourselves so we have kept some for ourselves and we are willing to give the rest, there would have been no problem at all. No problem. But because they deliberately set out to deceive, because of this pious pretense, this religious sham, this Christian fraud they were following Satan’s schemes rather than God’s good purposes.

For Satan is a liar. He pretends to be an angel of light when really, he is the prince of darkness. And he knows if he can bring hypocrisy into the Church. If he can bring falsehood into the Church. If people can really be serving Him rather than Jesus, then he can cause the early Church to lose its spiritual power.

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But it is just a little white lie. It’s a small exaggeration of the truth. It is not really going to matter in the long run, is it? No, it goes deeper than that. <sup>7</sup> “About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” “Yes,” she said, “that is the price.” <sup>9</sup> Peter said to her, “**How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord?** Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.” <sup>10</sup> At 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.”

Yes falsehood ruins fellowship. But the sin is more than just deception. Its conspiring to the test the Spirit of the Lord. Its lying to God. It’s taking the glory that should be God’s and giving it to ourselves. It’s making one seem more spiritual than they really are. More generous than we really are. Its not being real. It’s not being genuine.

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As one preacher has put it “generosity is optional, but genuineness isn’t.” Now I know they say fake it 'til you make it. But why try to fake it... when you didn't have to make it in the first place? The good news is that Jesus already made it for you. And so Christians are not people who are always keeping up appearances. They are not people who seem like they have got it all together. Because we haven’t it. We are broken people. Who let other down all the time but who ask for forgiveness and seek God’s power in life to move on. That’s what God wants for us. But Satan wants us only to come before others in our best clothes.

Imagine if God did exactly the same thing today with our Church? Imagine if the punishment for hypocrisy, for lying, for robbing God of his glory was immediate death! Do I really carry through with my promises? Am I withholding things from God? Do I do things to be seen by others or to look good? If God were to act like he acted in Acts 5, being a member of this Church would be an extreme sport, because it is dangerous to play games with God!

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The American preacher John MacArthur once said that this incident “stands in sharp contrast to the masses of uncommitted, even unsaved, people that feel comfortable in the church today. The failure of churches to preach holy living, and to discipline those who don’t live that way, allows sinners and hypocrites to remain in the church, convoluting its direction, sapping its power, robbing it of purity and marring its testimony.”

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Why don't we allow that truth to sink in to our lives today? Sin is serious. Hypocrisy is horrible. Spiritual fraud is robbing the Church of its power. Chuck Swindoll tells the story of an English pastor who got onto a tram one Monday morning to go back to his study. He paid his fare, and the tram driver gave him too much change. The pastor sat down and fumbled the change and looked it over, and counted it eight or nine times. And he said to himself, "Praise the Lord! It's wonderful how God provides!" He realized he was tight that week and this was just about what he would need to break even or at least enough to buy his lunch.

He wrestled with himself all the way to his stop but he couldn't let it rest. He got to the stop & said to the tram driver, "Here, you gave me too much change. You made a mistake." The driver said, "No, it was no mistake. You see, I was in your church last night when you spoke on honesty & I thought I would put you to the test." Wow. Each day Satan tests us. Will we pass it or will we fail it? Well Ananias and Sapphira failed but the early Church passed it.

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For what happened next? Verse 11, "*Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.*" There was great fear. We have already seen in the Church great power and great grace but being in the presence of God will also bring about a great fear. As well as great fellowship. <sup>12</sup>*"The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade..."* <sup>16</sup>*Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed."*

Satan wants to destroy the Church through deception and God grows the Church through genuineness. That's God's power. He uses all things for good for those who love Him. He can take Satan's arrows aimed at the Church & direct them back towards him! But Satan hasn't finished his attack. He just moves from inside the church to outside the Church & from

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## **2. Deception to Decreasing. (verses 17-42)**

Satan next uses the Jewish courts, the religious leaders to attack the Church and seek to stop them from talking about the name of Jesus. <sup>17</sup>*"Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy."* (Now where did they get that jealousy from, I wonder?)

<sup>18</sup>*"They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. <sup>19</sup>But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out."* I hope you see the humour in that verse. The Sadducees don't believe in angels! And so God sends an angel to release the apostles from the grip of the Sadducees, very amusing indeed!

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But it gets even more amusing because the council sends for the apostles from the jail and they are not there. No one knows that they have escaped and while the authorities are running around like keystone cops, they finally found them all in the Temple, preaching all about Jesus! They bring them in and try to intimidate them! <sup>28</sup>*"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, (notice they can't use the name Jesus!)" "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching & are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."*

And so, what is the apostle's response to this intimidation, this imprisonment, this pressure that Satan is putting on them? Well, they do what they did in Acts 2 and Acts 3 and Acts 4, they continue to preach to all about the gospel of Jesus.

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<sup>29</sup> Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings!  
<sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. <sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

Yes, they know what they are about to say is unpopular. They realise that what they believe is unpalatable. But they must obey God. You see they are not going to be kowtowed by men. They are not going to fail & give in to the test of Satan. They might have an unpopular message but they also have an unstoppable message. That is why when they are released they don't hot tail it out of Jerusalem but go to the Temple and continue to preach. It is the preaching of the gospel that has grown the church since the power of the Holy Spirit came. And so, they will continue to be witnesses of all the things God was doing around them.

God is calling Israel to repentance and forgiveness. God has entrusted this message of repentance and forgiveness in the name of Jesus to his followers and they are willing to take this message to the ends of the earth. And temptation from within will not stop them. And persecution from without will not stop them either.

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Now if you know any of the history of the Church you will know that these persecutions in the book of Acts continued on and very soon the apostles and the early Church are driven out of Jerusalem and Judea and into the Roman Empire. So, the Devil tries again under Emperor's Nero, in the 60's, Domitian in the 80's, Aurelius in 160's and Decius in the 250's. Horrible, violent persecution hits the church with a savagery that would shock us all.

Even today Marxist, Hindu & Muslim governments continue to harass & kill Christians. More Christians have in fact died under persecution in the last 100 years than the previous 19 centuries put together but we need not fear for the church's survival. Tertullian addressing the rulers of the Roman Empire cried out: "Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust... The more you mow us down, the more we grow; the seed is the blood of Christians."

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Or, as Bishop Festo Kivengere said in February 1979, on the second anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda, "Without bleeding the Church fails to bless." Friends, persecution will refine the Church but not destroy it. It will cause many to fall away but those who are true to Christ will remain. And often it leads to purifying those who are left, it causes them to be more obedient to God and so it actually leads to prayer and praise and a continuation of the spread of the gospel.

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Look what happens in this case! <sup>34</sup> "A Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law ... addressed the Sanhedrin and says...: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. <sup>39</sup> But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." He says if this is from God it will be like standing in front of a goods train, nothing we will do will stop it short.

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*40" His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah."*

Do you see their response? They praise God. They rejoice because they have been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for Jesus. These men do not emerge from their ordeal with a desire to sue the government for all its worth. They don't curse or look to take out their revenge. They praise God. They keep on preaching about the unstoppable message of Jesus.

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I read this week the story of Richard Wurmbbrand, he was imprisoned for years in his native Romanian because he was a preacher of the gospel of Jesus. He was treated terribly but in prison he still found great joy. He would actually stand up in his weakened state and dance around his cell, confident that the angels were dancing with him.

One day he was unexpectedly released from prison and he was walking down the road when a woman came down the other way with a basket full of beautiful strawberries. She offered them to him and he went to take one and then said "No thanks, I am going to fast." He went home to his wife, and they prayed and fasted as a memorial to the joy he had experienced in prison, asking God for the same kind of joy outside prison.

You see Satan can try and attack the Church from the inside and from the outside but God can use all of these things for good. Here he causes the Church to continue to grow, he gives them great joy in suffering and the word of God continues to go out. And out. And out. So Satan tries one last strategy. He attacks not just from the inside or from outside but he seeks to blindside the early Church. He seeks to deceive, decrease and then thirdly

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### **3. Distract. (6:1-7)**

And this might just be Satan's cleverest attack of the three. Satan tries to preoccupy the apostles with social administration, which although essential was not their calling. Satan attempts to get the leaders of the Church to neglect their God given responsibilities of praying and preaching because if he can do that, it will leave the Church without defense when it comes to false teaching.

*"In those days when the number of disciples was increasing the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food. 2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables."*

Don't you like the way that our writer Luke is being honest. The Church is just a matter of months old and it already has people trying to deceive others and now we see that there are divisions occurring. Between two different types of believers. One that has the Greek language and customs as their norm and the other who think and speak more like Hebrews. For every Church has problems, even the early Church, even our Church!

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And this is a real problem for there is a charge of favouritism. Pork barrelling. So what do the apostles do? They talk about the issue openly. They get the whole congregation together in order to come up with a solution. <sup>3</sup>*“Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”*

The leaders of the early Church don't try and do everything. They know that all believers have spiritual gifts. So they delegate the caring of the widows, to a new group they create called deacons. It is not that this work is beneath the apostles, it was a matter of calling, of different gifts and abilities. Making sure that everyone found their spot, their niche.

Now who did the Church choose? Stephen, Philip, Procurus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas are actually Greek speaking names and none of them are Jewish names. Which means seeing the apostles were all Hebrew Jews, they actually set apart seven people who were all Greek speaking Jews. So you think that your widows are missing out? Well, how about we find some of your people who will ensure that never happens again.

It is very smart thinking and means that now the Church has capable people from both sides of the fence in leadership positions. And it means now there are people in the know who can see both sides of the story. Satan wanted to cause division & distraction but instead the work of the church has prospered. The leaders put up their hand & said we have been trying to do too much, we have been micromanaging the work of the Church, we should have spent our time praying & preaching. And the people have said, we will step up and support you in your ministry and we will find our own ministries to help the Church go forward.

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And the result? <sup>7</sup>*“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly & a large number of priests became obedient to the faith”* Churches that keeps prayer and teaching the word at the centre will continue to reach out with the good news of Jesus. Churches that care, really care will help those who have been saved grow in godliness

So Satan tries to deceive and the Church is authentic and it continues to grow. Satan tries to decrease and persecute its key members and the Church is filled with great joy and fellowship. And then Satan tries to distract and the work of preaching and prayer is put firmly in the centre of the churches' life of faith.

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So what is Satan trying to do today? Will he attack us on the inside? If so, the answer is to live genuine lives of faith, open and accountable to each other, so that everyone can see how God is growing us warts and all. Will he attack on the outside? If so, the answer is to be bold, to be filled with thankfulness and joy and to uphold those who are doing it tough through prayer and fellowship. Or will Satan try and distract us asking us to put all our attention on Church buildings, on social groups, on internal conflicts? If so, the answer is for all of us to use our gifts and abilities so that we all may grow in our faith.

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Friends Satan is still active. Satan has his plans and purposes. But God is sovereign. He is calling us forward in the task of spreading the gospel to the very ends of the earth. Don't let Satan deceive, decrease or distract us. Instead let God grow us as disciples of the King Jesus!