

Ananias and Sapphira

Big Idea: God takes sin very seriously. Sin in our lives not only damages our own hearts, but it also damages our relationship with God and the communities we are a part of. If we don't own it and deal with it then it will continue to tear apart. God demonstrated how serious He is about sin in the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They were not willing to face their sin and He didn't want anything to get in the way of the new Church community. God also wants our small group to be the best it can be and that means each one of us facing our own sin.

Goals: That each student would:

- Understand how seriously God takes sin in our lives
- Recognize that our sin tears apart our communities (families, small groups, churches)
- Own the sin in their own lives and work on a plan to deal with it

Text: Acts 5:1-11; I John 1:5-10

Leader Reflection:

- How are you doing at owning the sin in your life? How do you keep this part of your life in check?
- How has God helped you to see and own the sin in your life? What have you learned about God in this process?

Practical Ideas:

- Make some brownies or cookies together. Get the students all excited about eating them and then mix in a "little" dog poop or something disgusting. Talk about how it is just a little and they probably won't even notice it. Compare this to how we deal with and tolerate sin in our lives.
- Have the students write down a sin that they need to own on a piece of paper. Then have them write down 1 or 2 steps that they could take to start dealing with this sin. Make it a goal to have taken these steps by the next group time. At that time you could burn/tear up the pieces of paper.

Discussion:

- Begin by reading the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11
- What do you think of how God acted in this story? Was it fair?
- Why do you think their sin mattered so much to God?
- What are some of the consequences that sin can have in our lives? What about "small" sins?
- How does sin affect our small group?
- Read I John 1:5-10. Where do you see yourself in this passage?
- Are there some sins in your life that you need to own? What could you do to own them?
- What does verse 9 say that God does with our sin once we own it and confess it to Him?

Peter's Escape

Big Idea: God is in control no matter what seems to be happening around us. Peter was faithfully serving God and he ended up in prison facing death. However, God was bigger and miraculously rescued Peter. In contrast, we also read that James did die in prison even though we can clearly see God has the power to rescue him. Even when things don't make sense we still need to trust God. He is bigger than whatever we are facing and though it may not be easy and painless we can know that He is in control and He loves us.

Goals: That each student would:

- See God's power demonstrated through Peter's rescue from prison.
- See the contrast in James's story
- Understand that God was in control of each situation and every situation we face as well
- Be challenged to trust God's plan no matter what the circumstances are

Text: Acts 12:1-19

Leader Reflection:

- When has God rescued you from something awful?
- When has God let you face something awful?
- What does it look like for you to trust God in each of those situations?

Practical Ideas:

- Do the trust fall (instructions in your leader manual) as a team building exercise. Use this activity to talk about the challenges of trusting. Also consider, "what if they let you drop?" Connect this with the challenge of James' part of the story.

Discussion:

- Read Peter's story in Acts 12:1-19.
- What would it have been like for Peter in this experience?
- What do you think it was like for those who saw him after they had been praying?
- Does it seem like they actually thought their prayers would be answered? Why or Why not?
- How do you think this experience made Peter think about God and His power?
- Go back and read verses 1-2 again. Why didn't God save James in the same way?
- Did God not see it coming? Was He powerless? Did He not care?
- ***Optional: Look up how Peter eventually died. Why didn't God save him from that?
- Why do you think God chooses to rescue sometimes and not other times?
- How do we know if God is going to rescue us or let us face whatever we are in?
- What does it look like to trust knowing that it can go either way?
- How can our trust in God grow?

Saul's Conversion

Big Idea: One of God's greatest works is turning His enemies into allies. Saul was fighting against God with everything that he could, but when Christ showed up Saul's life turned around. Christ had died for the very rebellion that Saul was living out, and Saul finally realized how much God loved him and what Christ had done for him. After that Saul (Paul) gave everything he had to serve God. Our stories are the same as Saul. Where once we were enemies, now we are allies. (Children and servants of God.)

Goals: That each student would:

- See the transformation in Saul's life
- Understand that each of us were at one time enemies of God
- Recognize the power of Christ's work of "reconciliation"
- Know that any person can be changed by God

Text: Acts 9:1-22; Col. 1:21-23; Rom. 5:6-11

Leader Reflection:

- How have you recognized that you were originally an enemy of God?
- Why would God choose to die for someone who has already rejected His love?

Practical Ideas:

- Spend some time talking about other people from history or the Bible that have made great turn arounds.

Discussion:

- Read Saul's story in Acts 9:1-22
- Why do you think Saul was fighting against the followers of Christ?
- What do you think Saul was thinking or feeling during his encounter with Jesus on the road?
- What else could have God done to Saul? Why do you think He chose what he did?
- What does it seem like Ananias was feeling when God called him to help?
- How do you tend to think about or treat your enemies?
- Read Col. 1:21-23 and Rom. 5:6-11.
- How did God treat us when we were his enemies?
- Do you think you were actually an enemy of God? Why or Why not? What does that mean?
- How do you think Saul felt after Christ changed his life?
- How do you feel knowing that you were God's enemy but can now be his ally?
- How might you need to change the way you look at God's "enemies" around you? How can you look at them like God does?

Stephen

Big Idea: God has told us that it will cost us to follow him. Stephen gave his life to stand up for Christ. Christ was more important to Him than his own safety. God's story is filled with many people who have been willing to sacrifice for God in big ways and small. Sometimes the small ways can be the most difficult. We need to always be reminded that the day-to-day sacrifices are worth it to follow God. If He is worth dying for then He is worth living for as well.

Goals: That each student would:

- Connect with Stephen's example of sacrifice for Christ
- Understand that God is worthy of any sacrifice we are called to make
- Consider if they are willing to sacrifice for Christ in their own lives
- Hear some practical examples of what sacrifice might look like for them

Text: Acts 6-7 (6:5,8-15; 7:54-60); Luke 14:25-33

Leader Reflection:

- When have you struggled to sacrifice for God? What are some things that hold you back?
- Who are some people that have inspired you by the way that they sacrifice for God?

Practical Ideas:

- Look up some stories on people who have given their lives for Christ or made great sacrifices for Him.
- Sacrifice snack for group that week and use the money or food to bless someone else. Sacrifice game time that week and use that time to pray instead.

Discussion:

- Begin by reading Stephen's story. (Acts 7:16-53 gives a good summary of the history of Israel which could be a bonus for the students to hear, but this section could be skipped for a shorter read.)
- What do you think Stephen was feeling during the trial? What surprises you about his actions?
- Who do Stephen's last words seem to mimic? Why do you think that is the case?
- Do you think Stephen regrets his decisions that day? Why or why not?
- What do you think you would have done if you were in Stephen's position?
- Read Luke 14:25-33. How would you summarize these verses?
- How might you have to sacrifice for Christ? What might it cost you?
- Are you willing to sacrifice for Christ? Is there anything that you are not willing to sacrifice?
- Which do you think is harder? Sacrificing something big once, or sacrificing something small every day?

Paul and Silas

Big Idea: Now that the world is broken, suffering is a part of life. We all have to face it. What God is interested in is our response to suffering. Paul and Silas were put in prison for serving Christ. They chose to continue to serve and praise God in the midst of that suffering. Their response revealed their belief that God was worth suffering for because He had suffered for them. Our response to suffering will reveal our hearts as well.

Goals: That each student would:

- Recognize that suffering is a part of life and especially of following Christ
- See how Paul and Silas responded to suffering and the results of their response
- Understand that Christ has suffered for them
- Be challenged to praise and trust God in the midst of suffering

Text: Acts 16:16-40; James 1:2-4

Leader Reflection:

- How do you respond when you don't get what you want?
- What are you doing because all of your needs are met in Christ?

Practical Ideas:

- Read the attached summaries from Louie's sermon on suffering in James.

Discussion:

- Read Paul and Silas' story in Acts 16:16-40.
- Why would Paul and Silas sing while they were in prison? How else could they have responded?
- What do you think the jailer was thinking and feeling when he realized all the prisoners were still there?
- What was it about that experience that made him want to get saved?
- How would this story have been different if Paul and Silas would have complained instead of singing? What if they would have left the prison cell instead of staying?
- How often do unfair things happen to you? Why is it that life seems to be broken?
- Read James 1:2-4. Why does James want us to be joyful about our trials?
- Describe some examples of people who have done this well.
- How often do you use the complaint, "That's not fair?"
- Could Paul and Silas have used that complaint? Why didn't they?
- Could Christ have used that complaint? Why did he choose to suffer like He did?
- Do you tend to be more focused on living for God or avoiding suffering and discomfort?
- What does it look like to honor God in you suffering? What could this look like in your life?

“Perseverance Must Finish Its Work” – Keep the End in View

James 1:1-4

Invitation: Let us bow before the Word and be changed by it.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, is on a warpath, passionate to communicate how we are to interface with trials. Why? Because they affect us more than anything else in life. James wrote to scattered believers. Why? Because when we're scattered, we need help. We must have a good theology of suffering in our arsenal and become pain experts, knowing how to persevere through it all. James 1:2 (Phillips translation) “When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends.”

There are two ways to respond to trials. One way is to look at them as intruders ... and cry ... “NO, NO! GO AWAY!!” ... when they knock on the door of our lives. We can stack up whatever it takes against that door to keep it closed and not let them in. Another way is to look at them as friends. Our response hinges on our worldview. Who is at the center? If I'm at the center, life will be all about me, by myself, for myself, etc. This is the temporal view that shuts the door, locks it, and won't let the trials in. If God is at the center, we keep the long-range view and see that God uses everything to assist us to the goal. This is the eternal view that welcomes trials as friends.

Pain enters our lives at four levels: As a person, a partner, a parent and a professional. Job experienced pain in all four areas. “What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.” (Job 3:25-26). In the middle of it all, Job says, “But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” (Job 23:10). This shows the *beauty of tension*. Job is basically saying, “Yes, it is difficult. But God is for me. I will come forth as gold.”

James 1:3 ... “because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” “testing” - In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the word refers to the *process* by which silver or gold is refined. **The process is the product.** Be aware of the push to go south, away from God. Go north instead. When we go south, we play the victim and become *manipulators* and *takers* ... at the center of which is pride. When we go north, we are moral agents who are responsible. This ushers us into a life of service and we become givers ... at the center of which is humility.

If we do not have a clear theology of suffering, our pain will not have a context to be correctly interpreted. Unresolved pain always has pride at its center. A proud person feels a strong sense of entitlement, believing that he is deserving of more and better. He is accusatory, and is a controller of situations and people. An example of this is Adolf Hitler. What was his greatest struggle? The Jews. They were the problem, and he wanted to get rid of them (the problem). See the pride in pain? That's a lesson to us. The average grudge lasts 30 years. Watch out for worldliness and pride (lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, and pride of life).

“Consider it pure joy when. . .” Suffer Successfully

James 1:1-3

“Consider it pure joy when. . .” How would you finish this sentence? Most of us would assume joy comes from receiving lots of money, moving into a nicer home, having excellent health, great kids, a good marriage, etc. But James says just the opposite. James is the half brother of Jesus, a younger son of Mary and Joseph. At first, he did not believe in Jesus, and thought Jesus was out of His mind (John 7:5, Mark 6:4). But later he became a prominent leader in the church, and was part of the leadership at the Jerusalem Council.

James had intimate knowledge of Jesus and could have written about many things. But he wrote about painful trials because this was the most pressing issue for the church at this time. The believers were scattered outwardly due to persecution, and inwardly their lives were falling apart. James wrote this letter to help them develop a theology of suffering. He wanted them to find an anchor in God’s truth to enable them to suffer successfully.

After a brief intro and a one-word greeting, James goes straight to the point in verse 2. *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.* “Consider” – The imperative tense means that we are to adopt this attitude toward trials. It calls for a mental evaluation as a result of deliberation. We are to regard our trials as the grounds for “pure joy.” This command gets our attention and causes us to examine our worldview. We have two choices regarding how we “consider” a situation. 1) Temporal – This worldview focuses on the here and now, on what’s happening to me externally, on living by sight. 2) Eternal – This worldview has God at the center. Through eyes of faith, we believe that what we *don’t* see is more important than what we *do* see.

In the original Greek, “pure joy” are the first two words of the sentence in order to emphasize importance. “Pure” carries the idea of intensity. “Joy” is to be unalloyed, e.g. wholehearted and sincere. James is not asking us to enjoy or to like our trials. He is helping us to see beyond them. Hebrews 12:11 carries the same thought – *No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

The verb “whenever you face” occurs only twice elsewhere in the New Testament. In Luke 10:30, Jesus used it of the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and “fell among” thieves. It pictures the man as surrounded by thieves on all sides, with no way of escape. This verb also occurs in Acts 27:40 of a ship that unexpectedly encountered a sandbar where two seas met and, running into it, was shipwrecked. Have you ever been personally shipwrecked, totally at the end of yourself, with no more resources and no way out? If so, is this a good or bad situation? Our answer depends on our worldview. If we live by sight, we will view this as bad. If we live by faith, we understand that it’s always good when we come to the end of ourselves, because it forces us to turn fully to God.

“Trials” is a neutral word and can have negative or positive connotations, depending on the context. In this verse, James has in mind the proving and testing of one’s faith.

“of many kinds” – This phrase has the meaning of variegated, or many-colored. This means that trials can come in many shapes, shades, and degrees. James is not saying that we will all suffer every one of these trials, but that we may be subject to these different possibilities.

“you know” – This verb carries the idea not only of full mental understanding of truth, but also knowledge that comes from personal experience.

“testing of your faith” – This testing is in order to prove or disprove the genuineness or validity of faith.

In both theory and practice, we must know that God is both good and great. No matter what is happening around us, there is no “bad” in His goodness, and no weakness in His greatness. As we grow in our understanding, we will taste and see that the Lord is good. Our trust in the Lord will remain intact, no matter what the trial. We will come out with a stronger faith at the end of the trial. This is a good thing, and a cause for pure joy, because faith is more precious than gold (I Peter 1:7).

If you listed the situations that have brought joy in your life, would your list include things like: no accidents, good health, promotion at work, family peace, lots of money, dream home? Or would it include: traumatic accident, loss of a child, job loss, loss of a grandchild, care of aging parents, cancer? Again, it depends on your worldview. As our personal application today, Gary and Judy Stewart will be giving their testimony regarding the trials in their lives, which include every item on the second list.

- Sermon concludes with the testimony of Gary & Judy Stewart.

Paul in Athens

Big Idea: God has given us the mission of telling others about the good news of Jesus. Paul was committed to that Mission. While he was waiting in Athens he saw the opportunity to reach out to those people and spoke in a relevant way to point them to Christ. We need to have the same passion to be aware of the lost people around us and speak the gospel to them in a relevant way.

Goals: That each student would:

- Recognize Paul's passion for the gospel and his commitment to share it with the lost
- Understand that it is their mission to reach those around them with the gospel
- Recognize that there are opportunities all around us to share the gospel
- Be challenged to intentionally pursue the lost around them with the gospel

Text: Acts 17:16-34

Leader Reflection:

- Who is on your 131 list? What are you doing to pursue them?
- How have you been discouraged with your efforts in sharing the gospel? How do you handle that disappointment?
- What are some things that keep you from seeing or taking the opportunities around you?

Practical Ideas:

- Have the students bring the names on their 131 list. If they have not come up with their names yet then give them some time to think of who they might be. (They could also pray for God to help them know with 3 to pray for.) As a group or in pairs pray for the names on the lists that God would open them up to the gospel and lead them to know Him. Also pray for each other that you would be willing and bold in your witness.

Discussion:

- Who are the people on your 131 list? If you don't have them yet who might you begin to pray for?
- What are some things that hold you back from sharing the gospel? What makes it difficult?
- Read Paul's story in Acts 17:16-34.
- What was Paul doing in Athens? Why was he there? (check out vs. 13-15 for some background)
- What could have Paul done instead of getting involved and sharing the gospel?
- What do we learn about Paul's passion and priorities through this story?
- Do you feel like you have a passion for sharing the gospel? Why or Why not? Is it ok not to have that passion?
- What are some opportunities like this in your story that you might be missing out on?
- Read vs. 23 and 28 again. How did Paul make his message relevant to the people of Athens?
- How can you be intentional about being relevant with the people you share the gospel with?

Paul's Shipwreck

Big Idea: God is bigger than any storm that we can face. When Paul faced the storm he was able to trust God even though everyone around him felt hopeless. It shows clearly how big Paul believed God was. Those with him took notice as well. As we live willing to take big risks for God people will notice our trust and be drawn to follow a God that can bring an unshakeable confidence and trust.

Goals: That each student would:

- Be drawn in by Paul's story of being shipwrecked
- Recognize God's hand of protection over Paul during the story and how Paul's trust showed those around him how powerful God was.
- Consider how big God is to them
- Be challenged to live in a way that demonstrates their trust in God to those around them.

Text: Acts 27:1-28:10; Romans 8:28-39

Leader Reflection:

- Describe a story of someone you know that has demonstrated tremendous trust in God. How has it impacted you to witness that trust?
- When do you feel most confident in God? When do you feel least confident?

Practical Ideas:

- Look up tips on how to survive a shipwreck for a fun way to interact with Paul's story.
- Do the trust fall activity (instructions in your leader manual). Use this activity to draw out the challenges and benefits of developing trust.

Discussion:

- Read Paul's shipwreck story in Acts 27:1-28:10. As you read make note of the times where Paul demonstrates a trust in God.
- How did Paul's trust in God influence the people around him?
- How do you think the other people in this story viewed Paul's God by the end of this story?
- Describe a story of someone you know who demonstrated a tremendous trust in God?
- Read Paul's word in Rom. 8:28-39. Why did Paul have such confidence in God?
- How does your confidence in God compare to Paul's? What does that look like in your life?
- What are some areas of your life that you struggle to trust God with?
- Paul eventually was put in prison and killed for following God. Why did God save him from the storm only to let him die later?
- How can we trust God if it doesn't necessarily mean that things will go well for us?
- How do you think Paul would answer that question?