

## **MONEY, LIES, AND THE FEAR OF GOD Transcript**

**By Dr. Ron Jones**

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Well, Wall Street is the place where many investors go to boost their profits and to increase their wealth. Most investors know that when you go to Wall Street you can find one of two kind of market conditions. One, of course, is you're in a bull market. The other is a bear market. We've all heard of the bulls and the bears. The bull market, more generally than not, is a time of optimism, a time of increase in profits and prices and all of that. The bear market just the opposite of that- a time of pessimism, a time when prices and profits and values are decreasing. But sophisticated investors know that during a bull market, where everything is up and to the right, there are times when the market corrects. Doesn't means that it's going into a bear market. It requires 20% correction sustained for three months before analysts say, "Now we're in a bear market." But a bull market kind of goes up and down and up and down. And there are sometimes corrections in the market. And you have to kind of, you know, deal with the corrections and have the stomach for the corrections. But overall in the bull market, everything is up and to the right and going well.

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We're not here to talk about Wall Street this morning. I say this because a few weeks ago when we started our series in the book of Acts, I said the start of the early church...if it were a stock, it would have been a great one to buy. Because as an initial public offering, boom, this thing exploded. And we had 3,000 people come to Jesus Christ on the first day on the day of Pentecost, the first sermon that Peter preaches. Two chapters later he preaches his second sermon, and the scripture says 5,000 more were added. I mean, this stock is off into the stratosphere. And then we come to chapter 5 of the book of Acts, and there is a correction. There is a correction. Something happens that makes everybody go, "Whoa, wait a minute. Are we in a bull market, or is this the beginning of a bear market," spiritually speaking. I'm talking about Acts 5 beginning in verse 1. It says, "But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.' When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, 'Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.' And she said, 'Yes, for so much.' But Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.' Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband." And here is the understatement of the year. "And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things."

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Wow, what a story. Everything was going great in the early church. Thousands...some even estimate tens of thousands when you add in the women and children, tens of thousands of people coming to faith in Christ. I mean, this is an incredible ride. And then this happens. A correction. The judgment of God falls upon this couple named Ananias and Sapphira because, well, they lied about something. They engaged in deception. We would call them the first hypocrites of the church posing to be something other than what they really were. And it all had to do with the donation that they made that they lied about.

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I remember back in 1986 Alan Greenspan was the fed chairman during the Reagan years. And the economy was doing really, really well, and everything in the market was up. And when the fed chairman spoke, Wall Street typically listened. And Alan Greenspan dropped a couple of words into a speech he was giving that made all of Wall Street kind of wake up and go into shock. He described the market as having a characteristic of irrational exuberance. I don't know if you remember that or not. But, you know, when Alan Greenspan said that, the shockwaves rolled across Wall Street. He was saying the market was too hot. It was a bull market, but it was too hot, and everybody put on the brakes. Well, I wonder sometimes when I read Acts 5 whether the Lord God of heaven was looking down and seeing a little bit of unholy and irrational exuberance the church, and He had to correct the church. He corrects them.

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It reminds me of 2 Timothy 3:16 that tells us that "the Word of God is inspired, that all scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof and for correction." And sometimes we need the Lord to correct us. Hebrews 12 calls it the kind of discipline that a father would give to his children. A good Father, a good, good, Father disciplines His children and corrects His children. And Hebrews 12 says if you're not a child of God, maybe one of the indications that you're not is you've never been disciplined or corrected by the Lord. But if you're ever been on the receiving end of the Lord's discipline and correction, that is an indication you are, in fact, a child of God, because a good Father does that just like an earthly father corrects and disciplines his kids.

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Well, the early church was receiving the Lord's correction, His discipline. And it was a sobering, sobering moment. Can you imagine arriving to church that day and they're carrying out two dead bodies? And you're, like, "What's going on here? What's with the hearse out there?" And you learn about this couple named Ananias and Sapphira who made a donation. They sold a piece of property, and they brought the proceeds. They gave it to the church, but they lied about the cost of that property and how much they made and how much they gave. And the Lord said, "No, we can't allow such hypocrisy and such deception to corrupt the body of Christ in that way." Again, it's a sobering, sobering story. And it puts the brakes on a little bit, you know. In the midst of this bull market, as it were, there's a correction, a correction that comes to the church and to the body of Christ.

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Well, what can we learn from this today? I think there are four lessons that I just want to share with you this morning. The first has to do with generosity in money. Remember, this is

“Money, Lies, And the Fear of God.” Generosity is evidence of real faith. And I really don’t want to say a whole lot more than that other than to point out the fact that this story about Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 stands in contrast to what we read in chapter 4 and verses 32 through the end of the chapter, verse 37. Because chapter 4 verses 32-37 gives us another glimpse into the early life of the early church. And it’s all about the generosity of the church. They were generous. They had things in common. They took care of one another. And then it highlights one man’s generosity. It says in verse 36, “Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.” And we say, “Way to go, Barnabas.” Mr. Encouragement, the son of encourage that he is. He encourages people by his generosity.

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And the way Luke arranges this material under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is meant for us to compare and contrast what Barnabas did to what Ananias and Sapphira did. Because we learned this about Barnabas at the close of chapter 4. Chapter 5, we get the Ananias and Sapphira story. And the not-so-subtle implication is be like Barnabas, not Ananias and Sapphira, all right. Generosity was what characterized the early church. Their response to the resurrection of Jesus Christ impacted their personal economy. How could it not? You’re on the receiving end of the grace of God and His generosity toward you in Jesus Christ. That should at some level produce a different response in the way you manage the money that God has entrusted to you. If you’re not becoming more and more generous with what God has entrusted to you, you need to examine yourself and examine your response to this thing called the gospel and the grace of God.

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It makes me think of the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. Remember wee little Zacchaeus? He was a chief tax collector, the Bible says. A chief tax collector. I take that to mean he had other tax collectors working for him, kind of had a franchise business. And he was very rich, the scripture says. The way they collected taxes back then—you know, the Roman government—was that the tax collector would get what was due Rome, and then they would put a premium on top. And if you were a really good tax collector, you got a pretty good premium for yourself. And Zacchaeus had done a good job with that and all the other tax collectors that worked for him. And he had become a very rich man. But one day Jesus was coming through town. And wee little Zacchaeus climbed up in that sycamore tree to get a view of Jesus. He was taken by him. He invited Jesus over to his house for dinner. And Jesus said of Zacchaeus, “Today salvation has come to your household.” Jesus looked at Zacchaeus and recognized saving faith in Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus response was, “Lord, half of my goods I will not give to the poor. And if I’ve defrauded anybody in my business, I’ll restore them fourfold.” When Zacchaeus met Jesus, it transformed his finances, his personal economy. And that’s all I really want to say about this.

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As we read the story of Ananias and Sapphira, although the primary reason the judgment of God fell and the correction came was not that they were lacking in generosity...it was because

they lied. Although that's the primary reason, there is a lesson in generosity here because of the relationship to the Barnabas story here.

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There is a second lesson, though, I think we can learn from this. And that is that integrity matters. This was the primary reason that judgment fell upon Ananias and Sapphira. Not because they should have brought all of the proceeds, but because they lied about what they brought. And God doesn't put up with such things. Peter said to Ananias in verse 3, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? You have not lied to man; you've lied to God." I mean, Peter just elevates the seriousness of what had happened here. Like Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira had a piece of property. Like Barnabas, they sold that piece of property. Barnabas brought the proceeds in full. That was his choice. There was no obligation to bring all of it. Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property, brought the proceeds to the apostles and made them believe that here was the price that they sold it for and they brought all of the proceeds. The reality was, no, they sold it for much higher price and brought only a portion. Now, there was no obligation for them to bring all of it or any of it for that matter. Giving in the New Testament is voluntary. It should be a voluntary response of our faith and our response to the generosity of God and the grace of God in lives. But there was no obligation for them to sell this piece of property and bring all of the proceeds. But when they did, they said, "Boy, we want some of the accolades that Barnabas got." And they lied about it. And Peter says, "You're not lying to me. You're not lying to all your brothers and sisters in Christ here. You're lying to the Holy Spirit. You're lying to God, and we don't stand for that around here."

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I remember when I was in seminary one of my professors reminded us many, many times that ministry is a character business. It's a character business. And it made all of us just kind of, you know, press the pause button a little bit and say, you know, "Can I really enter into this thing?" You can go be a widget seller or be in some kind of business out there, be a scoundrel, you know, just kind of walking carefully the line between something that is illegal and unethical, you know. You never fall into the illegal side, but, boy, you just wonder how ethical this is. And you can do your business that way and be successful and make a lot of money and be just fine. Not in the ministry. It's a character business first. Whether you're vocationally in the ministry as I am, or whether you're a volunteer in the church, it's all a character business. And integrity matters. Integrity, character, yes, competence. I could hire somebody or find a volunteer who has great character but no competence, and there is one problem you have there. Or you have the opposite, you know, somebody with great competence but lacking in character. Boy, that's a train wreck waiting to happen. It's a character business, and integrity matters. Not perfection, because none of us is perfect. But a person of integrity deals honestly with his mistakes, with his sin. Keeps short accounts with God in confessing his sin and repenting of it.

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And this is the example that we even have in the Old Testament with King David. And we're all familiar with David's shortcomings, right? But Asaph, one of the other psalmist, writes this about David. Psalm 78:73, "So David shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and he guided them with his skillful hands." There is character and there is competence.

Boy, that's when you know you've got a leader. Whether it's a paid staff member or a volunteer, when you have both character and competence, you've got a winning combination there. And we're all growing. David made his mistakes. But the New Testament assessment looking back on David was that he was a man after God's own heart. You say how can that be with the whole Bathsheba thing? Because eventually he dealt honestly with his sins. He was forthright about it. And he took his consequences, as it were, and he got right with God and confessed to sins. And not a perfect man, but a blameless man. A blameless person is somebody who deals honestly with his sins. And this is how we maintain our integrity. That's an important lesson here. Ananias and Sapphira lied. And this was the beginning of something great in local church. And if the Lord looked the other way on this, there's no telling how that would have eventually corrupted the entire church.

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Here is a third lesson that I jotted down this week, and that is that the devil is always looking for an opportunity to attack. Notice back again verse 3 Peter says, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart?" Isn't it interesting that Peter introduces the devil into the mix here. Peter is seeing with spiritual eyes. He is seeing what the apostle Paul wrote about in Ephesians 6, that we wrestle not against flesh and blood. Our enemy is not one another. It's not a physical person. But we wrestle against principalities and powers, against the rules of darkness of this world. Peter saw this as an attack on the church from a dark spiritual realm from Satan himself. And it's just a reminder to all of us that the devil is always, always looking for an opportunity to attack.

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Peter tells us in 1 Peter 5:8, "Be sober-minded and be watchful; your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour." And he has you in his crosshairs and your family. And he has this church, and he has me and all of our volunteers, all of our pastors, all of our leaders. He is looking for an opportunity. And he is always collecting opposition research on us. He knows our weaknesses. He's not omniscient, but he's been around for a long time. (0:19:00.1) And he practices his craft. The Bible tells us to be aware of the schemes and the strategies of the devil. Well, one of the things that he does is he collects opposition research on us, and then waits for just the perfect time to attack.

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This happened with Jesus. Remember when he went out into the wilderness? Fasting for 40 days and 40 nights prior to launching His public ministry. And at the end of that 40-day period of time, the Bible says He was hungry. And that's when the devil shows up. And he tempted Him in three different ways. And every time, you know, Jesus said, "No, it is written, it is written, it is written..." He dealt with that temptation by pulling out His sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. And He defeated the devil in all three of those temptations. And then the Bible tells us in Luke 4:13, "And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time." He's opportunistic that way. Always looking for the right opportunity to attack. And this is why we need to be sober. We need to be watchful. We need to be vigilant. Even when everything is going great in the church and you feel like you're in a bull market, spiritually speaking. Wow, you look around, everything is wonderful. The fellowship is sweet, lots of people coming. Boom, the devil attacks. And this is what happens in

the early Christ. Three thousand people come to know Jesus on the day of Pentecost. Five thousand people the next time Peter preaches. Boom, Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira. And it's a sobering moment. It's a correction the Lord brings to the church. And you just have to remind yourself the devil is always looking for those opportunities.

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The fourth and final lesson is this. God is holy and He is deserving of our reverence. We call that reverence the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord. Twice in these verses it references this. The latter part of verse 7, "And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard these things." Yeah, fear because they're like, "Wow, this is a sobering moment to see these two dead bodies walked out of the church. What happened?" And they begin chatting about it. But also I take this to mean that the fear of the Lord came upon the people. When the Lord disciplines us, when He corrects us, it's not out of anger. It is because He is a holy God. And to be holy spiritually is to be healthy spiritually. And if there is any unholy, irrational exuberance in our lives or in the church, He is going to correct it. He is a holy God. And He says, "Be holy as I am holy." You can't continue in this way and be healthy spiritually. We've got to be holy. And He is a holy God, deserving of our respect. And that's what the fear of the Lord is. It's that awesome respect we have for God and who He is and how He's revealed Himself in scripture and the commands He gives us. An awesome respect that we have for Him, such that it changes the way we live. Rather than going this way, we repent and we turn the other way. And the Bible says over and over again in many places that the fear of the Lord is a good thing. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

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Later in Acts 9, I believe it is, it says, "The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied." God's blessing will fall upon a church that fears Him and respects Him and what He has revealed of Himself in scripture.

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It shouldn't surprise us really that this correction happens. You know, again, a sophisticated investor on Wall Street knows that, even in a bull market, the corrections will come. That's normal and natural, even in a bull market. And it's really normal and natural when God is doing something new and big. You go back into the Old Testament when they completed the first Tabernacle. Leviticus 10 tells us there was a correction that took place. They had finished the building of the Tabernacle. And they were getting ready to worship. Two of Aaron's sons... Aaron was the first high priest. He was the brother of Moses. And two of his sons, Nadab and Abihu, come to that first worship experience. And the Bible says they brought what's called strange fire. We don't know exactly what strange fire was, but it was some kind of unholy exuberance that those two young boys brought. And the Lord killed them. Wiped them out right there. The death of Aaron's sons, who worshiped the Lord in some unholy way at the first worship service at the brand new opening at the Tabernacle. "We're going to correct that right now," the Lord said.

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And then do you remember the time when the Israelites were crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Joshua was leading this. And they begin to overtake some of the cities. One of the largest ones was Jericho. And they march around the city of Jericho those seven times. And on the seventh day they march seven times and shouted. And there was this great victory when the walls of Jericho come down. And then a chapter or two later they go up against this little city over here called Ai. And Joshua says, “Oh, we don’t need to take the entire army up there. It’s just a tiny little city up there.” So they took a smaller army. They go up there, and they get there pants beaten off. You know, they’re just obliterated by the little army of Ai. And Joshua and the guys come back, and he’s kind of got his tail between his legs. And the Lord is saying, “Get up off the ground, Joshua. Why are you crying out and bellyaching to Me?” And what they learned is there was a guy named Achan who had stolen some of the items in Jericho that were not to be taken. And he hid them in his tent. There was sin in the camp. And the Lord says, “That’s why you went up to Ai and you were defeated.” And the story of Achan...they stoned him. I mean, it’s a sobering moment. I mean, anybody would just say, “Wow, the Lord was pretty severe in all of this.” He is a holy God. He is holy. He is righteous and deserving of our respect. If He says, “When you go up to Jericho, don’t take any of the spoil for your own,” that doesn’t mean take a little bit for yourself. And the Lord says what He says, and He means what He says. And sometimes a correction needs to happen.

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It happened when they built the first Tabernacle. It happened when they crossed over into the Promised Land. It happened as the early church began. When the Lord is about to do something big, a little correction might come. And that happens in your life individually, in your family individually, in mine individually. It happens corporately in a church as well. Is it a time to believe, if it happens, *wow, this is all over. We’re in a bear market. Everything is going down, down, down, down, down?* No, you know what I’ve discovered in more than two decades of ministry? God’s church is resilient, incredibly resilient. Because Jesus said, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” Oh, the devil will look for an opportunity to attack, yes, but he won’t prevail. He may win a battle, but he’s not going to win the war. Jesus said, “I will build my church.” Not, “I will build your church,” not, “You will build my church,” but, “I will take full responsibility for building my church, and I will do it My way.” And sometimes, as a good, good Father—like an earthly father lovingly corrects his children—sometimes He corrects His own children by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

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And this is what’s happening in Acts 5. It doesn’t mean the church is over. Much to the contrary. Now the church is better prepared to go into the future. And beyond Acts 5 we find the church growing and multiplying because great fear has come upon them. Great respect for God and who He is and what He has said in His word.

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Hebrews 10:31 does say, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Hebrews 12:28, “Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. And thus let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” And a lot of times we don’t like to hear that. You know, as believers in Jesus we want to hear that He is a good, good God who loves us but is never going to correct us, never

going to discipline us. Well, that's not the God of the Bible. That's not even a good earthly father. A good earthly father will see something that his child is doing that's wrong and will correct that child, disciplines that child and lead that child forward in love. And this is what God does to His church, even though this story of Ananias and Sapphira.

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And for me, this little story about money, lies and fear of God is just a reminder again. This is His church. He will build His church. He will build it His way and on His terms. And we do best when we follow in obedience to Him and when we respect Him and fear the Lord. It's the beginning of wisdom, and it's the beginning of great things that happen in our lives individually and in our families and in the church as well.

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