

The Good and Beautiful

Bible Study



*Volume Two - Exploring Stories From the Bible
& Experiencing Their Impact on Our Modern Lives*

 ALABASTER



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The Good and Beautiful
Bible Study
VOL. II



An Introduction & How to Use This Book

The Bible is good and beautiful. Its vast, historical recognition not only establishes its authority in our collective lives, but also shows us how its story and storytellers lead us to something bigger than ourselves.

Hearing stories has always deepened our understanding of our world. In early Jewish traditions, we see storytelling as a foundation for the flourishing of relationships, knowledge, and culture. Deuteronomy 11 (NLT) invites its audience to “commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these words” and “Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up.” These early traditions invite us to hear stories as an enduring, generational, and immersive experience.

This invitation from Biblical storytellers is often overlooked in our modern society. In today’s contexts, it can be easy to reduce this ancient text to a set of brief take-aways, or moral to-do lists. But when we choose to see the Bible in this way we miss out on the fullness of what these stories can be—something wholly sensory and embodied.

We can look to early traditions of storytelling as a guide to engaging with the Bible today. The first communities gathered around sacred Bible stories, learning to embody those stories from generation to generation. Art has played a prominent part in this process, transmitting biblical stories and making them meaningful for each new generation. There is wisdom in following the steps of this method—noting how things transpire, and allowing them to speak, without rush or force. We used this as a guide in designing *The Good and Beautiful Bible Study* and invite you to engage with it two-fold:

READ

Whether it’s heard aloud or in silent reading, hearing the story in its presented form is a bedrock for curiosity, conversation, and relationship.

I.

Each chapter’s reading section opens with a **designated theme, synopsis, and reading list**. We invite you to begin your chapter experience by investigating these resources.

II.

The chapter then has an **outline**, retelling the story’s events. To conclude the readings, we move into the **today** section, where we ponder the story and inspect its qualities and themes as they exist in our modern world today.

REFLECT

Through thoughtful curation of artwork, guided prompts, questions, and design, we invite you to integrate the story into the present and embody a full sensory experience. Looking to early traditions, we encourage gathering and sharing in this experience with others.

Each chapter’s reflect section is structured with prompts that will guide you through a process: Pause, Ponder, and Pray.

I.

Pause: Bring awareness to your response to the story. Each chapter has contemplative artwork and prompts inspired by the story’s theme(s) to help guide you into the following steps below.

II.

Ponder: Deepen your understanding of the story with questions to reflect and/or discuss with your community.

III.

Pray: Close your time with a written prayer uniquely crafted for each chapter.

We hope these promptings and works of art allow for a deeper experience with the Bible. Through your study, let there be joy, kinship, and an abounding connection with goodness and all of creation. Amen.



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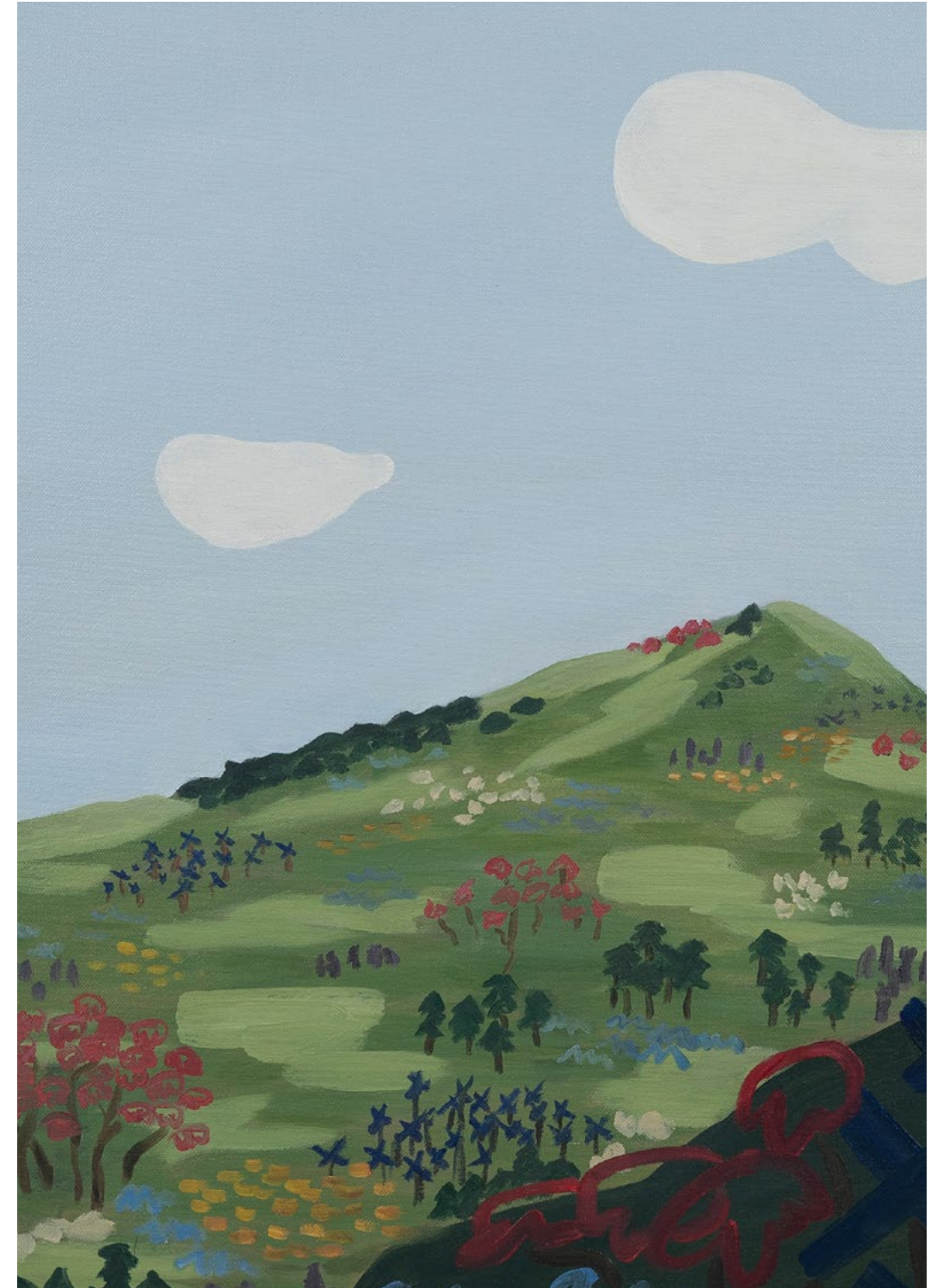
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Vol. II

Choosing Our Path

The One Who Delights in the Law of the Lord



The Story of The One Who Delights in the Law of the Lord

SYNOPSIS

A Psalmist offers metaphors for two paths of life—one of the blessed, who meditates on God’s words, and one of the wicked, who commits wrongdoings.

KEY MOMENT:
Psalm 1

Read

OUTLINE

Imagine a tree in the woods, firm and strong, planted on the bank of a river. This tree provides a home to any number of creatures. As the seasons change from winter to spring, the tree brings forth sweet and satisfying fruit. Passersby satisfy their cravings on their early spring walks. When summer comes, families flock to the tree for its shade and to swim in the adjacent river, bringing joy and connection to the woods and the larger community. In fall, its colors turn and bring a depth of beauty to all who lay eyes on it. And when winter comes again, it stands strongly through the storm, giving shelter to creatures who need it while preserving its energy for the following season of growth.

This is the path of one who delights in the words of God, who meditates on these words and creates space in their life for those words to take root. This blessed person provides shade and shelter for others, stands strong through the changing seasons, and offers joy, beauty, and connection to the world.

The same is not true for the wicked—the one who lives outside of the will of God. This person’s life looks nothing like a tree that stands rooted in a space that can sustain it. Instead, they are like chaff—the discarded leftovers of a pile of grain. Chaff is inedible, and the slightest gust of wind will blow it away. It scatters and disperses, offering no value or sustenance to those around it.

This is the path of the wicked—taking advice from those who make bad decisions, going along with every wrongdoing done around them, and mocking those

who try to do the will of God. Their path leads to eventual destruction—a judgment by God.

God watches over the diligent person who is like the tree, rooting themselves in the words of God. They are truly blessed and prosperous.

TODAY

The psalms are an anthology of prayers, hymns, and other poetic texts, collected for use in Temple worship. They are multi-dimensional and deeply human: offering praise, lament, and all kinds of expression to God. The psalms come out of an authentic longing for connection to the Divine, a longing that connects us today to the world they were written in.

This psalm, like many others, is more descriptive of the world around us than it is prescriptive. We can look around and see the people doing their best to live in the way of love, joy, and peace—the way of God. The reality is not that they don't experience hardship—they have their winters, too—it's that they have a firm foundation and an environment around them that helps them remain strong and flourish throughout the years.

Likewise, we know people who continue to listen to those who don't have their best interests in mind, those who celebrate wrongdoings and mock those who strive to walk down the path of God.

While this psalm helps us see two types of paths we can choose to walk down, we can also acknowledge that life isn't always binary. The reality is that there are so many paths in front of us, and many of us zig-zag through life. We may find ourselves in seasons moving down a spiritually unhealthy path—but the grace of God can appear and reveal a trail back towards the Kingdom of God. The psalm serves as a guide—a reminder—of where we may find that trail back to God.

The wisdom of this psalm is more potent when we integrate the complexities of modern living—it's not always easy to practice the ways of God in our culture. There are so many distractions and cultural messages that run counter to the wisdom of God. Meditating on the words and ways of God can act as a compass that provides us with direction in an overwhelming society. Likewise, recognizing that we are handed so many different kinds of messages, this should help inspire compassion for others and the paths they take—their path will be judged by God alone at the right time. Instead of putting our energy into judging others' paths, we should strive to live a life that is truly blessed and rooted in the words and ways of God. This is the invitation of the psalmist.

In poetic, prayerful form, this psalm offers us a choice between two types of paths. Which path will you take?

Reflect

PAUSE

Sit up straight.

Take a deep breath.

Using the art element (on the previous page), take a moment to reflect on the story.

PONDER

Invite God to speak to you:

- I. What are the values that guide your life? What kind of path are you currently on?
- II. How can you consistently use God's words to guide you through difficult times and challenges?
- III. How can you extend compassion to those on paths that are different from yours, knowing that their path will be judged by God alone?

PRAY

God of Wisdom,
may we be like the tree,
firmly rooted in your words.
May we not be like the chaff,
scattered and swayed
by the path of destruction.
Guide us
amidst life's complexities,
and bless us
with abundant life.
Amen.

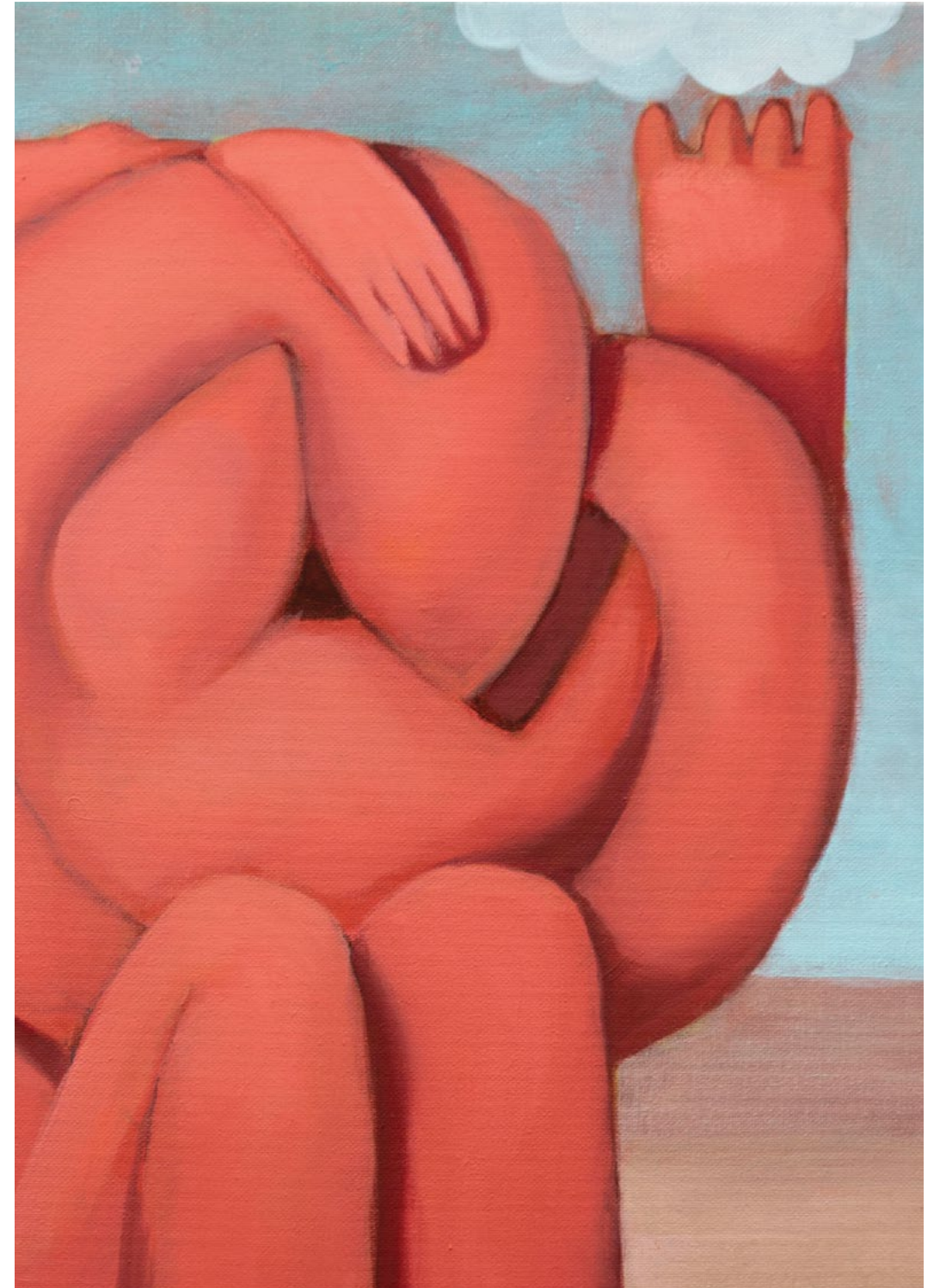


The Grass Is Greener, Et Al.
BRYAN YE-CHUNG, 2022

OIL ON CANVAS

Struggle

Adam & Eve



The Story of Adam & Eve

SYNOPSIS

This famed creation myth culminates in curses against the snake, Adam, and Eve, and illustrate life's ancient and modern struggles.

KEY MOMENT:
Genesis 3:8-19

FULL READING:
Genesis 2-3

OUTLINE

Genesis 2-3 covers the second creation myth in the book of Genesis. However, it is more than a myth about how physical creation came to be—it is a myth that describes how our struggles and our sorrows came to be as well. It illustrates both the beauty and the tragedy of life.

In this version, YHWH gathers dust from the ground and shapes it into the first human. God then plants a garden for the human to live in and care for. The human can eat the fruit of the land, except for the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil—a form of knowledge we often describe as wisdom.¹ God sees that it is not good for a human to be alone, so God makes animals. Still, this is not enough, and God makes a second human, a woman, as the culmination of all of God's creative work.

In this garden, the two humans meet a snake, one of God's creations.² The snake convinces them to try the fruit, which will make them wise, despite God's prohibition.³ The two humans seek wisdom—they desire to know good and evil for themselves; this desire for knowledge, for ancient readers, would have been understood as part of maturing out of childhood.⁴ As soon as they eat the fruit, the two become aware of being naked, and they hide when God enters the garden. God questions the humans, and they proceed to pass the blame—from the first human to the woman and from the woman to the snake, perhaps implying that the blame lies with God, the creator of the snake.

Then God pronounces several curses. “Cursed are you,” God says to the snake, which now will move on its belly, eating the dirt, and fearing the children of the woman. Perhaps the irony was apparent for ancient hearers. In the Hebrew Bible, winged-serpents called seraphim are God’s attendants, but this snake now crawls and hides on the ground.

God says to the woman that her pregnancies will be multiplied, and they will be painful.⁵ Part of the curse is also a dreadful state of patriarchy in which men will rule over her. God says to Adam, “Cursed is the ground because of you.” Now, the once-fertile ground will produce thorns and thistles, and Adam will have to labor intensely to receive food from it.⁶

Both of the first humans’ namesakes become tied to their sufferings. Adam is named after *Adamah*, the Hebrew word for soil or land, but now Adam suffers on account of the land, and the land suffers on his account. The one named after the ground itself is the cause of its curse. Furthermore, his relationship to the ground is strained. The woman is named *Chavah* (English: Eve) which sounds like the Hebrew word for life, *chayah*. She is named after life itself, but the process of bringing forth life will be painful and dangerous for her. The names of the first humans reveal how the beauty of land and life seems to have turned against itself.

TODAY

Snakes are cursed, humanity is cursed, and the ground is cursed. Genesis 3 is a challenging text for us. But this text is not about sin, a word never used in Genesis 3. Nor is it about a “fall,” which is also not used in this chapter. This text is about feeling as if one lives under a curse.

Life was exceptionally hard in ancient Israel and Judah. The people struggled as subsistence farmers, and they relied on a rainy season that was notoriously unreliable. “Most males who survived early childhood typically lived into their mid-thirties, while most women died as early as their late twenties, half of them in childbirth.” David Carr, a professor of the Old Testament, suggests that the curses of Genesis 3 adequately describe the hardships early Israelites faced in their daily lives. Ancient Israelites hearing this vivid story would have known women who tragically died too young, men who ruthlessly sought to dominate all others, and the challenging work of persistently farming arid land.

The blues standard, “Born Under a Bad Sign” by Albert King describes this feeling of being born cursed. The song starts with the words “Born under a bad sign, been down since I begin to crawl. If it wasn’t for bad luck, you know I wouldn’t have no luck at all.” Like this song, Genesis 3 describes an experience of

life's perpetual hardships. Creation experiences alienation from God, humans experience alienation from one another, and we collectively experience alienation from the land itself. Genesis even describes alienation from our very selves. These curses are not arbitrary, and they describe struggles still faced by us today.

Pregnancy still is incredibly dangerous for many women. Our “wisdom” and “knowledge” has both led to amazing innovation, but also to greater potentials for death and suffering. We have, through our wisdom, altered the earth itself, producing climate catastrophes and further alienating ourselves from the land which becomes increasingly less hospitable for all life. Producing food to feed humans remains a challenge across the world. Various states of patriarchy and gender-based dominance continue to persist with grave consequences. When we consider the experiences of our own lives and families, or witness the suffering of other people on the news or social media, or hear of impending catastrophes for our warming planet, it still feels as though we are cursed, “born under a bad sign.” Genesis 3 would suggest that these are not intended states for creation, but curses which we should work against. Genesis 3 is a lament, not a prescription.

Briefly, let's consider one of the responses to the states of alienation we encounter. In Hosea 2, the prophet announces God's desire for salvation.

“On that day, an Oracle of YHWH,
You will call me ‘my husband.’ ...
I will make a covenant for them on that day,
With the creatures of the field, the birds of the air,
and the creeping things of the ground...
I will answer the heavens,
and they will answer the land.
And the land will answer the grain,
the new wine, and the fresh oil...”

Here, God announces a salvation. Rather than being alienated from the land, we will be brought into covenant with the land, with all the creatures of the air, land, and sea. And the land, rather than thistles, will answer with grain, wine, and oil. Hosea 1–3 also recalls the alienation experienced in human relationships and from ourselves, declaring that salvation will be the restoration of broken relationships between us. Salvation here is expressed in the exact terms of Genesis 3. This is a call to restore our relations with God, with one another, and with the earth and all its creatures. To participate in salvation is to restore our covenant with the land and with one another.

Reflect



PAUSE

Sit up straight.

Take a deep breath.

Using the art element (on the previous page), take a moment to reflect on the story.

PONDER

Invite God to speak to you:

- I. In what ways do the enduring curses of Genesis 3 still resonate with us and impact us today?
- II. Consider the passage from Hosea 2. What would a harmonious, peaceful world entirely removed from the curses of creation look like?
- III. How can we work against the curses of creation and bring about restoration in our relationships with God, one another, and the earth?

PRAY

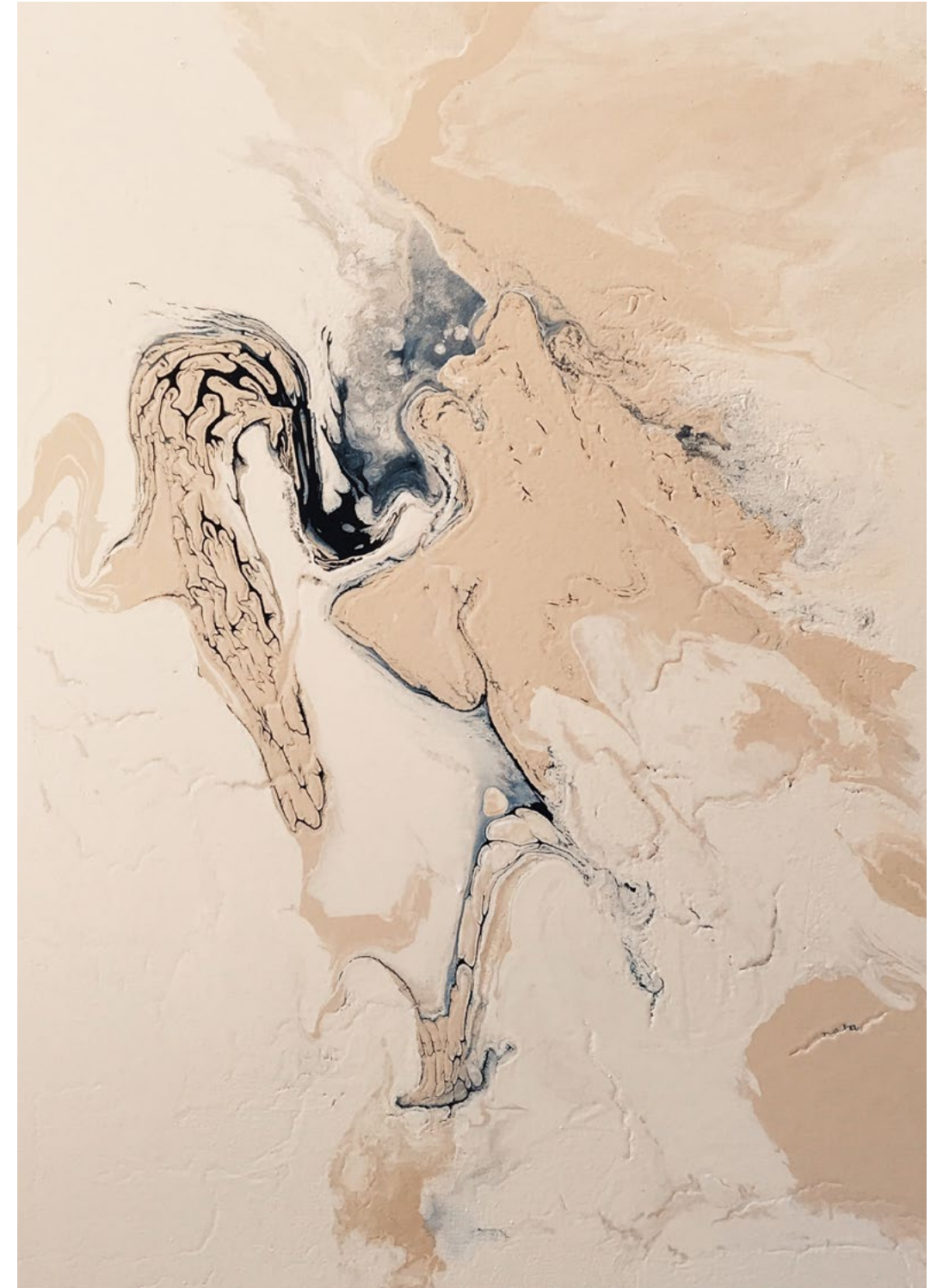
God, help us restore our bond with life and the land.
Help us alleviate the pain of our curses.
May your promises bring forth new life.
Save us, heal us.
Amen.

Sunburnt Nudes
JULIA SIGNE, 2021

OIL ON CANVAS

Giving Honestly

Ananias & Sapphira



The Story of Ananias & Sapphira

SYNOPSIS

The tragic story of Ananias and Sapphira is about a couple who lies about their extraordinary gifts, an Early Church culture made up of people who give and share freely, and the deadly consequences of the couple’s deception.

KEY MOMENT:
Acts 5:1-11

FULL READING:
Acts 4:32-5:11

Read

OUTLINE

When the Holy Spirit falls on Pentecost, people witness God’s presence in a way they had not before.¹ After Peter proclaims the Spirit’s pouring out on all flesh, many Jews repent, are baptized, and embrace a radical communal formation.² Many sell their possessions to support the common purse, from which all their needs are met.³ Consequently, the church multiplies, and the easy flow of giving and receiving transforms people’s lives. The haves and the have-nots find deep, meaningful fellowship with each other under the unifying banner of the Spirit.

One brother sells a property and brings all proceeds to the disciples.⁴ So moved by his actions, they give him the name Barnabas, which means “son of encouragement.” This name precisely affirms what the Spirit is doing throughout the entire community—encouraging them. Just as God compassionately provides Jesus for salvation, they generously offer resources to ensure that all material needs are met—boundless benevolence in action.

However, a husband and wife named Ananias and Sapphira see the attention given to Barnabas because of his gift and decide that they want to sell property and give a gift, too.⁵ While we cannot be entirely sure of their motivations, we know that they only come forward after the disciples single out Barnabas’ generous gift. Perhaps they think that if they gave more than Barnabas, they will receive new names and special recognition from the disciples as well.

But when they come with their gift, it is not the same as Barnabas’. Barnabas had brought all the proceeds

from his sale. This couple only brings some of their profits, but present it as everything. We do not know why they did not offer the whole thing or why they were dishonest about only bringing a portion. Regardless of their reasoning, Ananias and Sapphira go through with the deception.

When the husband presents the gift, the disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, ask the man why he let the devil deceive him; he does not just lie to them, but to God as well.⁶ Instantly, he falls dead. A few hours later, his wife comes, and the disciples ask her if she and her husband had sold the property for the amount the husband brought. She solemnly says that they did, and right there, she too falls dead and has to be carried out, just like her unfortunate husband.⁷

The Spirit does not require people to give *all* they have, but the Spirit does expect honesty. In representing a portion as the whole, this couple prioritizes their desire for prestige and position over the transformative care the Spirit births into the community. This is the only passage in the New Testament where someone is struck dead by the Spirit. As the church witnesses their demise, it provokes fear. Given the structure of the story, we might distinguish how deception undermines encouragement. The community's generosity is a sign of encouragement. Ananias and Sapphira's duplicity leads to discouragement and death.

TODAY

A community like that in the first few chapters of Acts—marked by radical inclusion, hospitality, and generosity—encourages us. In our present context, so many of our communities and connections are

mediated by social media. What makes social media so compelling is how it curates a portion of life as if it is the whole of life. Through our feeds, we select the bits of ourselves we want the world to see and long for the recognition that likes, engagements, and reposts offer. We are encouraged by these platforms to consume *portions* of peoples' lives and stories as the whole of their existence. Yet, on these platforms, we can too easily fall into patterns of deception about our actual lives. Instead of having our needs and vulnerabilities graciously met by a community, we can find ourselves isolated and unwell, with our community unable to encourage us when we need support—all because of a desire for popularity or recognition.

Nevertheless, God desires more for the church. The gift we have in the Church of Jesus Christ is to bring our *whole* selves, gifts, and liabilities—not because it is all beautiful, but because the Spirit promises to dwell in all of our flesh. Ananias and Sapphira could not trust that they were enough as they were. The more they centered themselves, the less they surrendered to the Spirit. God's transformation welcomes the vulnerability born in naming our needs and trusting the Spirit's desire to encourage us in communal generosity. We do not need more likes; we need the tangible witness of care. We do not need more reasons to fake it; we need space to come as we are.

While this passage highlights money as an object withheld, in truth, it can be any aspect of our lives that we deceitfully withhold from God and others. This story serves as a cautionary tale that represents the stakes of honesty with God and our communities. The invitation remains to give ourselves—but to do so honestly, in step with the Spirit, and for the benefit of the community we belong to.

Reflect

PAUSE

Sit up straight.

Take a deep breath.

Using the art element (on the previous page), take a moment to reflect on the story.

PONDER

Invite God to speak to you:

- I. In what area(s) of your life do you need to sincerely bring your entire self before God?
- II. How can we learn to trust in the Spirit? Where are we being invited towards vulnerability—whether by naming our needs or giving without reservations—to participate in communal generosity?

PRAY

God who knows all
and sees all,
receive all of me
as I am.
Grant me the freedom,
without reservations,
to trust in your goodness
when honesty invites me forward.
Amen.



Partie de l'âme
WESLEIGH BYRD, 2018

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