

Discipline, persecution and growth...

Acts Chapter 5

Introduction

The chapter begins with the sobering story of Ananias and Sapphira, their sin and how it was dealt with. While we may wince at the harshness of the discipline, bear in mind Jesus' attitude to sinners. When Jesus came across an adulteress or thief, his response was always compassion and forgiveness – however there was one sin he used the harshest words against (Matthew 23 v 13 to 31, John 8 v 41 to 58)...

Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5 v 1 to 10)

- So what was their sin really? Note that it was not selling land, nor even giving only a part of the proceeds to the Church. What made their sin so serious?
- What do you think led them to commit this sin in the first place?
- Do you think Peter was surprised when Ananias died? What's the warning for us here?

“Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...? You have not lied to man but to God.” (v 3, 4) – God gave Peter a ‘word of knowledge’ (1 Corinthians 12 v 8). Peter did not accuse Ananias of lying to the church or to the apostles, but to the Holy Spirit himself.

“While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?” Peter acknowledged that the land and its value belonged to Ananias alone; he was completely free to do with it what he wanted. His crime was not in withholding the money, but in deceptively implying that he gave it all. Of course, his sin was greed (in keeping the money); but his greater sin was *pride*, in wanting everyone to consider him so spiritual that he ‘gave it all’ – when he had not.

“When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last” (v 5) – Peter did not pronounce a death sentence on Ananias. He simply confronted him with his sin and Ananias fell down dead. Peter was probably more surprised than anyone else when Ananias fell down dead. The death of Ananias was the judgment of God...

“How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?” (v 9) – Sapphira was a knowing and willing participant in the sin, as well as the blatant cover-up. God's judgment of her was just as righteous as his judgment of Ananias. “Great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things” (v 11) – this is the first use of the name ‘church’ in the Book of Acts.

The name Sapphira means ‘beautiful’ in Aramaic. The name Ananias means ‘God is gracious’ in Hebrew. It might seem that their names contradicted their lives, but we see the beauty and graciousness of God in two significant ways: (i) assuming Ananias and Sapphira were actually heaven-bound, God was beautiful and gracious enough not to deny them salvation even for a grievous sin; (ii) God continued to bless the church, protecting it not only against outside attack, but also against inside corruption...

Miracles and wonders (Acts 5 v 12 to 16)

- Note the “many miraculous signs and wonders” (v 12) and that “all of them were healed” (v 16). What do you think was the secret of apostles' power and success?

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“Many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles” (v 12) – in Acts 4 v 30 we read that these early Christians prayed that God would continue to do signs and wonders through the name of Jesus. This shows that this prayer was answered, and these remarkable signs and wonders continued. As described in other places in Acts and in the Gospels, they may have included healings, deliverance from demonic powers, and unusual blessings.

“More than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes...” (v 14) – the church kept growing. Though people knew it was a serious thing to become a Christian (v 13), the Spirit of God kept moving with power. “Added to the Lord”, not to a ‘church’, or even to a movement, but to the Lord himself. This amazing growth followed the ‘cleansing’ of the church associated with the Ananias and Sapphira incident.

The Apostles are persecuted (Acts 5 v 17 to 42)

- Why did the angel tell the apostles to go to the temple? What were the apostles told to do?
- What two charges did the high priest bring against the apostles (v 28)? The first charge was like a ‘report card’ – how do you think Peter might have felt when he heard this accusation?
- How did Peter reply (v 29 to 32)? Was he ‘politically correct’? What parts are played in this passage by the three persons of the Trinity – God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit?
- Gamaliel was a Pharisee and well known as a teacher of the law (one of his more outstanding students was Paul). What advice did Gamaliel give to the Sanhedrin? Was it sound advice? Was it godly?
- What did the apostles suffer? How did they react? Did they ‘learn their lesson’? How would we have reacted? Are we afraid to suffer as a result of faithful witness to Christ?

“Filled with jealousy” (v 15) – the apostles, like Jesus, were persecuted because their good works and popularity were a threat to the religious establishment, which, sadly, left the people worse off, not better. “An angel of the Lord opened the prison doors” (v 19) – angels are ministering spirits sent to minister to those who will inherit salvation (Hebrews 1 v 14). God sent this angel to minister to the apostles by opening the prison doors. “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life” (v 20) – their rescue from prison happened so they could continue their work. God did not set them free for their safety or comfort. They were set free for a reason; and after this they were not always delivered.

“We strictly charged you not to teach in this name” (v 28) – the chief priests had commanded Peter and John not to teach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4 v 17, 18); yet Peter and John openly told them that they would continue, in obedience to God (Acts 4 v 19, 20). The accusation of the high priest (“you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching”) was a wonderful testimony to the effectiveness of the message preached by the apostles. “You intend to bring this man’s blood upon us” – the high priest meant that the apostles held the Jewish leaders responsible, in some measure, for the execution of Jesus (Acts 2 v 23); yet the apostles must have desired the Jewish leaders to come to faith in Jesus, as some priests did (Acts 6 v 7).

“The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree” (v 30) – Peter spoke of: (i) man’s guilt (Jesus whom you killed); (ii) Jesus’ death (hanging on a tree); (iii) Jesus’ resurrection (“God exalted him at his right hand” v 31); (iv) man’s need to respond (“to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins”). Peter referred to the cross as a ‘tree’ because of the association with Deuteronomy 21 v 22, 23, where it says that a person hanged from a tree is cursed by God.

Gamaliel was a Pharisee. Though the Sadducees had more power, it was politically foolish for the Sadducees to ask the Romans to execute the apostles without support from the Pharisees. “They did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus” (v 42). Whatever shameful treatment the Sanhedrin gave them, it did absolutely no good. The disciples did not stop preaching for a moment...

Prayer – Lord, we are amazed and awed by these accounts. Help us always to be truthful and honest in all that we say and do. Help us too to be bold and courageous, obedient and faithful in our witness to Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.