

Episode #11-29 Acts 5 Part 1-The Scheme of Ananias and Sapphira

I. Acts is unique in the New Testament. Rather than the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth, it focuses on what came after, when the Lord had ascended back into heaven. The Lord left His disciples with many commands to carry out, and Acts tells us how they did them.

II. The believers were all in a great unity in Jerusalem. None of them counted his possessions as his own, but all shared and shared alike. We will learn about a man named Barnabas who did this. Then, however, we learn about the sad case of a couple who almost broke the unity.

III. The Great Unity. Acts 4:32-37.

- A. Verse 35. This passage is almost universally misunderstood because people do not recognize the property laws that existed in Israel. These property laws were so different from ours, we will probably always have difficulty in understanding them. Every Jew had a portion of the land that could not be sold. Most of the land was community property. Each family was allotted a certain portion. The family could sell their rights to this, but they could give no title to it, and it came back to the original owners in the year of jubilee. Additional land could be acquired, but it could only be for the time that remained until the jubilee. If the jubilee was 48 years away, the land was of more value, and if it was 1 year away, it was of less value. Some of the believers had acquired land in this manner, and that is what they sold.
- B. Verse 36. This special case introduces Barnabas to us. His given name was Joses (*Ioses* in Greek), but the apostles named him Barnabas, meaning “Son of Encouragement” or “Son of Comfort,” in Greek *parakleseos*, like the Holy Spirit in John 14:16 and 16:7. Had to do with exhortation, but with the encouragement that exhortation brought. We see him acting like this with Paul in Acts 9:27. He was a Levite, but not a native-born Israelite, but was born in Cyprus, an island off the coast of Syria in the Mediterranean Sea. He is given this elaborate introduction due to the important place he is going to fill in later Scripture.
- C. Verse 37. Some property in Israel was not communal property, and these could be purchased with a title unaffected by the jubilee. As a Levite, Barnabas would have an allotment, but that allotment could not be sold. This valuable piece was his personal property, and he sold it and brought the money to the apostles. Some properties could be held this way. We can commend Barnabas for this, and he got quite a bit of honor for doing it. This sets up the next chapter, which continues right on from here. This is a bad chapter break, as the story continues in Acts 5:1.

IV. The Scheme and Death of Ananias. Acts 5:1-6.

- A. Acts 5:1. Continuing the story from chapter four. Perhaps Barnabas had received praise for his gift. This man Ananias wants to receive praise such as Barnabas had received. He was not a particularly bad man. In fact, he was among the believers. He now confers with his wife Sapphira to sell a possession of his own. It was his own property, and he had every right to sell it. When we are considering the word of God, it needs to be remembered that there has to be a meeting between the mind of the reader and the ideas set forth by the Holy Spirit. The place of this meeting could become a battleground, and in the end either the truth declared by the Spirit is going to prevail and survive, or else it is going to be the reader’s prejudices that will prevail and survive. Only one will be victorious when the battle is over. Many who read this about Ananias and Sapphira are going to see nothing more than a normal situation. In

the heading of this portion, Scofield heads this, “The state of the church at Jerusalem.” They say we would see this today “if the church were more holy,” as one writer puts it. Those who do not do this, but who keep their own preconceptions in the background, will see in this a record that these people lived in a different situation, under different circumstances and conditions—in other words, that these people Ananias and Sapphira lived under a different Divine administration than we do today. Ananias and Sapphira were followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Acts period, and because they were believers, they were also a part of the *ekklesia* of God, which at that time was being formed by the Spirit of God. These two facts alone placed them in a situation in which no believer finds himself today. Their deaths were a sign of the times in which they lived, and this sign indicated to all that they lived in a time when men in their position could expect each sin and transgression to receive its just recompense of reward. All others were thus warned that they could expect a similar penalty if they committed a similar sin under the same circumstances. The sin that they committed was the sin of misrepresenting their giving, and by doing so they lied to the Holy Spirit, Who was fully operating at that time. Don’t say that if men were more holy, these same things would happen today. Don’t say that this is a normal situation. It is not a normal situation. It is something that belongs wholly to the Pentecostal administration. The name Ananias means “God is Gracious.” That means God deals with men in love and favor that they do not deserve. That is true, but Ananias did not live under an administration of grace, as we do today. Ananias lived in a time when men beheld the goodness and severity of God, Romans 11:22. We live in a day when we behold nothing but God’s goodness. Ananias could not misrepresent his giving and continue to live. We can misrepresent our giving and still attain to a ripe old age because we are living under a different dispensation. Ananias and Sapphira belonged to a company who are destined to judge the world, and even to judge angels, as I Corinthians 6:1-3 tell us. This was the purpose for which this *ekklesia* was being called. A Spirit of covetousness could not be tolerated for one moment by God in any member of this *ekklesia*. When men had been chosen in Israel to be rulers over 1000s, 100s, 50s, and 10s, two of their four qualifications were that they should be men of truth and men who hated covetousness, which is stated in Exodus 18:21. No man can rule under God if he lacks these two qualifications. Here among those who were ruling to a certain extent, and who were destined to rule to a greater extent, lo and behold, the sins of lying and covetousness were found.

- B. Verse 2. Luke records the facts, but it is not difficult to reconstruct the scene. Barnabas, with a sincere heart, had sold a piece of land. He brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet. I don’t think Barnabas wanted any word of praise. He was doing what he believed that the Lord would have him to do. It may be as he turned to leave after depositing the money that Peter called him back and spoke a word of acceptance and personal commendation. It may even be that Peter assured him that he would receive one hundredfold now in this time, in harmony with the words of the Lord in Mark 10:29-30. All of this was a temptation to Ananias. The seed of covetousness began to sprout in his heart. He talked over the matter with his wife. They agreed on what to do and what to say and how to act. Ananias carried out the deed, and he waited until these out-called men were assembled and the apostles were present to teach. When the time came to make the offerings, he deposited a bag of

- money at the apostles' feet, adding a few words that expressed his intentions and explained his act. He wants all the praise, but does not want to have to give it all. Thus, with his wife's knowledge, he keeps part, and pretends he had given all. This was the first serious threat to the great unity (Acts 2:44-47, and Acts 4:32-35). Ananias' selfishness threatened the open honesty and complete trust among this group. Will a spirit of covetousness and personal gain be allowed to creep in, or will God act to preserve the fellowship?
- C. Verse 3. Ananias fully expected Peter to answer, accepting his gift and personally commending him for his deed, assuring him that he could expect from God a hundredfold in return. Maybe he thought if Peter said this on earth it would be ratified in heaven. But Peter did not speak these words. Instead, Peter's words became an exposure of the sin of Ananias. Filled is the same word as "filled with the Holy Spirit" in Acts 4:31. Satan was the one acting to try to disrupt the great unity that God had created. Yet this fact does not let Ananias off the hook, for he should have resisted him. Instead, he had not just lied to the apostles, but also to the Holy Spirit (Greek "the Spirit the Holy") they represented. Peter implies that Ananias ought to have resisted Satan's temptation. Ananias could and should have done this.
- D. Verse 4. Instead, he had plotted to obtain glory he had not earned by lying to God. There was no excuse for Ananias' sin, since the money was his. He did not need to sell his property. He could have done so and have just given a part, and no one would have complained or could have criticized him. The only requirements were that he make no false pretenses about it, that he make no lying to the Holy Spirit about this, and that there be no element of covetousness in his act. His penalty reveals that giving was a risky practice in the Acts period. Notice that the Holy Spirit and God are interchanged here. The Holy Spirit is the same as God Himself.
- E. Verse 5. Peter only spoke such words as the Spirit gave to him. The words he spoke stated the sin of Ananias, but Peter never announced or pronounced the judgment that was to fall upon him. This would make clear to all that the punishment was entirely a Divine act, chosen by God. Ananias was given no opportunity to repent, for he had sinned a sin unto death (1 John 5:16). Yet Ananias' final fate was not determined at that time. 1 Corinthians 5:5. God's grace could be applied even to Ananias.
- F. Verse 6. This might seem very strange to us, not even calling Sapphira to her dead husband's side, but this was entirely in line with their burial custom at that time. If one died away from home, he would be taken to the family sepulcher, after which his family would be notified. Greek *ethapsan* = to entomb, and in their culture would have referred to placing one in a sepulcher, not buried in the ground. He would be laid in his family sepulcher, where his relatives and friends could come out later to view the body. The common meeting place for the disciples was in the temple of God, Acts 2:46. The "young men" were probably temple servants, who would be quick to remove any dead body that could defile the temple.
- V. Conclusion: in the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, we see God's Spirit acting in a miracle of Divine punishment. He was calling people to leadership in His government, and no covetousness was allowed. Lying to the Spirit Himself was a great misdeed, and it threatened the very heart of the great unity God was building in Jerusalem among His people. Yet He acted powerfully and decisively to remove the selfish elements from the mixture and keep the unity pure. Today when we live under God's administration of grace, no such powerful acts of punishment take place, no

matter how much we might lie to the Spirit. We can clearly see the difference in character between God's administration today and the governmental administration that existed in Acts.