

Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11)

This is one of the most puzzling and awesome stories in the book of Acts. At the end of chapter 5 we hear that the people were selling properties and bringing the money from the sale and laying it at the apostles' feet as an offering to God and for the benefit of the Christian community. Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold a property and withheld a portion of the money. The implication is that they said it was the entire value of the sale when they gave it to the apostles. First the husband and then the wife drop dead after their deceit is revealed through the Holy Spirit. Everyone is filled with fear and then the text goes on to describe the great growth and power of the apostles' ministry and the Jerusalem church.

What do we do with this story? It seems to be a disproportionate response to minor infraction. They were voluntarily giving a large gift, their sin was to gain a bit more glory for the gift than warranted. We see this all the time with little plaques that donors put on the pews, rooms, and furniture of churches all of the time. Where is God's forgiveness? What about Grace? Why do others get away with greater sins and do not receive such severe and immediate punishment from God? These are all important questions. My response to this story is to allow the Scripture to guide us in our approach to this kind of interpretive issue. In the Old Testament there are two stories that seem to have a similar context and seemingly harsh response from God. The first is found in Leviticus 10 – when Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, offered "Unauthorized fire before the Lord." And the second story comes from 2 Samuel 6 when Uzzah reached out to steady the Ark of the Covenant as it was being brought to Jerusalem by David and he was struck dead. In all of these situations the progress of the plan of redemption was at a new point of change. The first was when the tabernacle worship and the priesthood were just beginning. The second was when the worship of the Lord was being established in its soon to be permanent place in Jerusalem and the final one, our passage in Acts, was when the Church was just beginning. I believe that at these points, the Lord makes it clear that he is to be honored in the way that he requires not the way we want to do it. The priests needed to offer the "fire" that God commanded not do it their own way – David needed to handle the Ark and the worship of God as God commanded in the law of Moses not the way he thought was right – and now in the period of grace and the church, the worship of God must be done with integrity and honesty not however a person sees fit.

Questions concerning this summary section on the growth of the church (Acts 5:12-16)

1. Can you think of any other times in the Bible when God demonstrated his approval and presence to his people in this kind of miraculous way?

- Probably the most obvious parallel is with the early ministry of Jesus. Look at Luke 4: 38-41. This is a description of Jesus' début in Capernaum. There are many parallels with the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the beginning of the Apostles' ministry in the book of Acts. God is confirming that the same power that was at work in Jesus as an individual, who was a revelation of God, is at work in the Church, corporately, as they represent God to the world.

- Another parallel that we might see here is with the miraculous signs demonstrated by Moses when he lead the people of God out of Egypt. That was a key point in the history of God's people as they were being formed as a nation and God was demonstrating that he was indeed in the midst of this change. The beginning of the Church is another great change for the people of God and the presence of miraculous signs confirms that it is God who is leading these changes.

- In all three cases, signs and wonders confirm the leadership of the person that is performing them as the chosen one or chosen ones of God to lead his people. First Moses, then Jesus and then the Apostles all needed that clear indication that what they were doing was directed by God because it represented great change and also God would use them to leave for the future inspired Words from God that would become part of the Bible.

2. Why are some being drawn to this new community of faith and others “wouldn’t dare” to get close to them?

- True Christianity is both appealing and threatening. To some it satisfies the desire that is in their heart to know God and be in true fellowship with others who are following him. To others, however, it causes fear of God’s judgment on their sin, fear of changing what is comfortable and familiar, or fear of surrender of your power and authority to God.

- Notice that the believers and the Apostles are meeting openly in a public place before all of the eyes of those who may be drawn to the faith and those who may be critics or even persecutors of the faith. There is a sense of boldness. If we are going to make a difference in our community, we as a church, must not hide behind our walls and steeple. We must be seen by the community so that it is forced to make a decision about Christ. Either they are drawn by what they see or filled with fear and reject the message.

3. Was there magical power in Peter’s shadow?

- The answer is “NO”. That is not the way that God works even if the people might have been thinking that that was the case. Peter would have been the first to admit that he was nothing special, but for the grace of God, and his shadow had no special power.

- Do you remember a time in the ministry of Jesus when something similar occurred? Luke 8:43-48 Jesus healed the woman with the issue of blood, who just wanted to get close enough to Jesus to touch the hem of his garment. Was there magic in Jesus’ coat tails? NO! The power was God’s and had something to do with the faith of the person who believed in the identity and anointing of the messenger of God.

- Beware of magical gimmicks to transfer the power of God. A clear teaching of Scripture is that God’s power works through relationship with Him not magical formulas.

4. Where are the people coming from and why is that important?

- They are coming from the towns around Jerusalem. The impact of the church is expanding beyond the boundaries of the city. This is important because they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and then on from there (Acts 1:8). This is the first indication that the growth is extending into the next level.

5. What kinds of people are being ministered to by the Apostles in this passage?

- They are the sick, demon possessed, and needy. Many times it is the needy, who are attracted first by the Gospel because they are the ones in desperate need of hope. It is then through the testimony of the careful attention to those in need that others are drawn to the community of faith.

- When we make a difference in the world around us, we will experience the favor of the Lord upon us and we will grow as a church.

The Apostles are persecuted

In verse 17, the religious leader arrest the apostles and put them in jail. During the night an angel came and opened up the Jail and they were free to go but they were told to return to the temple and preach to the people. Imaging the faith that would have taken. When they finally realized that they had escaped and were again preaching in the temple they are afraid of what to do. They were furious and wanted to kill them. At this point a prominent Pharisee named Gamaliel gives them this advice, “If their teaching is from man it will die out, if it is from God... then you don’t want to be fighting against God.” They therefore flogged them and let them go. The apostle left rejoicing that they could suffer for the cause of Christ and the Gospel.