

The Book Of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 4:36-5:11

Of all the stories in the Book of Acts, the one we are looking at today has been the subject of scholarly and theological debate for centuries. The story of Ananias and Sapphira makes us think carefully about issues like grace and judgment, as well as the conditions for eternal salvation.

In addition, this story shows us what one scholar has called, “the honesty of Luke as a historian”. Since Ananias and Sapphira’s actions did not reflect well on the early believers, Luke might have omitted them in his account to Theophilus. Luke not only records the couples’ deceit, but also the consequences for it.

As I researched these verses, I came across F.F. Bruce’s comparison of two biblical events: Achan’s deception in Joshua 7 and Ananias’ deception in Acts 5. Here’s what Bruce writes:

The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God.

It may be that the author of Acts himself wished to point this comparison: when he says that Ananias “kept back” part of the price (v. 2), he uses the same Greek word as is used in the Greek version of Joshua 7:1 where it is said that the Israelites “broke faith” by retaining for private

use property that had been devoted to God.” – F.F. Bruce

That’s an interesting comparison, isn’t it? The story of Ananias and Sapphira has been used by various preachers to several different ends. Today, let’s allow the text to speak to us without immediately encumbering it with our personal theological viewpoints.

The story really begins at the end of Acts 4, so let’s read that and the opening passage of chapter 5 together:

“Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet. But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property and, with his wife’s complicity, kept back some of the money received; then he brought the other part and placed it at the apostles’ feet.” - Acts 4:36-5:2

We already know the background to this story. As we have seen, after the events of Pentecost many of the initial converts did not return home. Instead, they opted to stay and participate in the life of the newly formed Church.

As a result, the Church found it necessary to support these brothers and sisters. Acts 2 tells us that they sold properties and possession and brought them to the apostles – who distributed them to those in need.

Barnabas was one of those who sold properties and brought the money to the apostles. This act of benevolence is highlighted for us as the lead-in to the

story that follows. When we read the text the word “but” alerts us to the fact that what is to follow will be different.

We will get to Sapphira’s situation a little later, so for now let me condense the statement: “But a man named Ananias ... sold a piece of property and ... kept back some of the money received...”

There is the contrast. Barnabas sold a piece of property and brought the entire proceeds to the apostles. Ananias sold a parcel, but only brought a portion of the sale to Peter.

Now, I want you to notice something at the start. When Ananias sold that property, he wasn’t obligated to bring the full amount to the apostles.

That wasn’t the issue. Ananias could have brought a portion of the sale price and told the apostles that was the case. Peter makes this clear in verse 4 when he said, “Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal?”

So what was the problem? Ananias and Sapphira pretended to bring the full sale amount and lied to the apostles.

This is where we find a parallel to Achan’s deception after the battle of Jericho. Achan kept back from God’s treasury both silver and gold. Ananias kept back a portion of the proceeds from his land.

It appears that the moment Ananias put his benevolence offering with the others, Peter had a revelation of the true situation. Look at what he says to Ananias in verse 3:

“Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?”

There are several things worth noting in that verse. First, the real motive of Ananias and Sapphira is exposed.

Again, Barnabas had sold property and given the proceeds to the apostles. He was, no doubt, commended for his generosity to those in need. In a way, we could say that Barnabas generated a reputation among the rest of the believers.

Ananias was striving for the same recognition. The problem was, he tried to take a short-cut. In essence, he created the illusion of a greater generosity than he was really practicing. The true deception was pretending his generosity was at the same level of others like Barnabas.

We don't know for sure, but it's possible that Ananias and Sapphira originally vowed to give the whole proceeds of the sale to God. They may have changed their minds, prompting them to give the lesser amount.

There are many Old Testament verses that warn about breaking vows to God. For example:

- Deuteronomy 23:21 says, “If you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.”
- Ecclesiastes 5:5 says, “It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.”

I suggest that Ananias and Sapphira originally intended to give the Church the entire proceeds because there is a hint of that in the original text.

When Luke says Ananias “kept back” part of the money for himself, he uses the Greek verb “nosphizomai”, which is translated into English as the word “misappropriate”.

The same word is only used one other time in the New Testament, in Titus 2:10, where Paul says slaves should be taught “not to steal from [their owners], but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.” – Titus 2:10

Because Luke uses the term “to steal”, we may be correct in assuming that Ananias and Sapphira had entered into some sort of agreement to give the church the total amount from the sale of their property. Instead, when they held back some of the money, Luke records their actions as stealing. In other words, it was an act of embezzlement.

Second, Peter identifies Ananias’ deception as an attempt to lie to the Holy Spirit. He says, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?”

Notice Peter’s identification of Satan and the Holy Spirit in his question. But there is more. The statement, “Satan has so filled your heart” is a throwback to another event, Judas’ betrayal of Jesus. Look at what Luke says in his gospel: Then Satan entered the heart of Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve apostles.” – Luke 23:2

Peter is clarifying the context of the attempted deception. It wasn't just Ananias and Sapphira acting out of their human impulse. Satan was using them to plant deception within the tight-knit community of believers. What the Church's adversary could not accomplish by a direct assault, he attempted by internal corruption.

Let's look at verse 5-6: "Hearing these words, Ananias fell down and died, and great fear came on all who heard about it. The young men got up, wrapped him in a winding-sheet, carried him out, and buried him."

Let's talk a little about this immediate outcome of Peter's rebuke. Now, we are not told what caused Ananias' death. Was it a heart attack? Was it a supernatural judgment? We aren't told.

We might consider what Paul said to the Corinthians about the consequences of disregarding the rest of Christ's body at their love feasts. In 1 Corinthians 11 he writes,

"Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep." - 1 Corinthians 11:28-30

The New Living Translation is somewhat more direct when it translates verse 30 this way: "That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died."

However Ananias died, the affect was immediate. Those who were present were immediately imprinted by what

happened. They understood the dangers of trying to defraud God.

Now notice that Luke says some young men came and wrapped Ananias' body in winding sheet and took him away for burial. As we know, the Jews practiced immediate burial. They did not embalm corpses, so burial took place right away.

Here's another thing we might not realize: Burials almost always took place outside of the city, as few Jewish people had tombs. The dead were often buried in necropolises or caves, which were outside the main city.

Let's keep moving through our text. Let's read verses 7-10:

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." 9 Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

Three hours after Ananias had died and his body was carried away, Sapphira joined the rest of Jesus' followers. She was unaware of what happened to her husband, and evidently, no one told her either.

Why did it take her three hours to arrive? Luke doesn't tell us. John McArthur suggests it took her that long to do her hair and get dressed up. He said it, not me!

Sapphira is taken before Peter, and he asks her whether or not the sale price of the land was the amount her husband declared. Sapphira is at the crossroads, but she doesn't know it. If she had any qualms with her husband's deception, this was her opportunity to come clean.

She doesn't. Instead, she says, "Yes, that was the price".

This is round two for Peter. And I think he has a very good notion about what is about to happen. He looks at Sapphira and says, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

This is what leads me to believe that Ananias didn't just have a heart attack; that it was an immediate divine judgment. Before Sapphira has a chance to defend the ill-fated deception, she too falls dead at Peter's feet. The same young men who took Ananias's body for burial now come and get hers as well.

Since we are at this juncture, we may as well deal with the question that someone is bound to have entertained. Were Ananias and Sapphira genuine believers?

There is simply no way to answer that. On the surface, they belonged to the Jerusalem Church. They were contributing to the benevolence fund – despite their lie

about the amount of their land sale. But there is nothing to lead us to say, "No, they weren't really believers."

Some might say, "Well, they certainly didn't act like Christians." Let me suggest that if we are going to attempt to apply that reasoning, at one time or another, that could be said about almost every believer. So, this isn't really a lesson in salvation. It's a lesson about purposeful hypocrisy!

Notice what verse 11 says: "Great fear gripped the entire church and everyone else who heard what had happened."

God meant for his people to see the consequences of Ananias' and Sapphira's hypocrisy. He meant for his people to understand the dangers of treating the Holy Spirit with contempt.

Twice in Acts 5 we read how, "Great fear came upon all who heard of it." It appears in the text after the death of Ananias and again after the death of Sapphira died. If we keep tracing that phrase, we will find it again in Acts 9:31, which says,

"So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied." - Acts 9:31

Let me make one final note on Acts 5:11. Luke writes, "Great fear gripped the entire church and everyone else who heard what had happened."

For the very first time in the Book of Acts we find the Greek word “ekklesia” – which is translated into English as the word “church”.

Ekklesia has a Gentile and a Jewish background. In the original Gentile sense it signifies the citizen-assembly of a Greek city. We can find that in Acts 19:32, 39, 41. However, in the Jewish setting it refers to a community of Christ followers.

In the Greek Old Testament, it is one of the words used to identify the people of Israel as “Yahweh’s Assembly.”

Here’s the point: In both the Old Testament and New Testament God has a people. They are the “Ekklesia” – the “called out ones” that form his Church.

Luke is by inference telling us that God has always had a people who were called to be separate from the world system they lived in.

Ananias and Sapphira failed the test. What will we do?