

THE REST OF THE STORY

Studies in the Book of Acts

***“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it –
but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”***

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Text

Acts 4:32 – 5:10

Topic

Ananias and Sapphira are struck dead for lying to the Holy Spirit

Title

Don't Be Caught Dead in Church

Acts 4:32 Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.

Acts 4:33 And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all.

Acts 4:34 Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold,

Acts 4:35 and laid *them* at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.

Acts 4:36 And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus,

Acts 4:37 having land, sold *it*, and brought the money and laid *it* at the apostles' feet.

Acts 5:1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession.

Acts 5:2 And he kept back *part* of the proceeds, his wife also being aware *of it*, and brought a certain part and laid *it* at the apostles' feet.

Acts 5:3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back *part* of the price of the land for yourself?

Acts 5:4 While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

Acts 5:5 Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things.

Acts 5:6 And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried *him* out, and buried *him*.

Acts 5:7 Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

Acts 5:8 And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much."

Acts 5:9 Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband *are* at the door, and they will carry you out."

Acts 5:10 Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying *her* out, buried *her* by her husband.

Introduction

Almost every Bible commentator remarks that it's a good thing God doesn't still kill us on the spot for lying to the Holy Spirit. If He did, ***there might be many dead men and women at the end of our services.***

There **is** something worse than being instantly killed by the Holy Spirit for lying. **Not being killed** is worse because it allows you to go on living a lie.

I am glad that God doesn't kill on the spot! But I don't want to be among the living dead. I want to be alive to the Spirit of God.

- being changed to bring change -

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Are Most Alive When You Are Filled With The Holy Spirit, and #2 You Might As Well Be Dead When You Are Lying To The Holy Spirit.

#1 You Are Most Alive
When You Are Filled With The Holy Spirit
(4:32-37)

The first Christians were wonderfully alive to the presence and power of God. They were motivated from within by the love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. One example of this was their selling of possessions in order to care for the physical needs of one another.

Acts 4:32 Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.

Imagine if we really shared a single **heart** and one **soul**. Everything that happened to you, or that you felt, would also happen to me and be felt by me. That's how close these first Christians were with one another. It was as if they were joined at birth, only in their case it was their spiritual birth.

We are still not very far into the history of the Church – probably only weeks. Many of those who had received Christ were from far away but had chosen to stay in order to learn about the Lord from the apostles. Others who had been joined to the Church were undoubtedly poor. Those among them who had **possessions** sold them to care for those who needed material help.

We are under no obligation to sell all that we possess and share with one another. There are, however, many warnings throughout the New Testament about the spiritual dangers of the love of money. Those who have wealth are exhorted to use it to serve the Lord. All of us are expected to be generous to one another and to use the things we acquire in this temporary world for the greater spiritual good.

The sharing described in these verses is an example to us. The Church should be a place where your needs are known and then met by your brothers and sisters in Christ as they are prompted by the Holy Spirit. It should be a place where you are prompted to meet the needs of others – whether they be material or spiritual.

Acts 4:33 And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all.

This verse is inserted here for a reason. It was precisely because the Church was so vibrant and alive to the Holy Spirit that the **witness** of the **apostles** to the **resurrection** was so successful. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is true and needs nothing to prove it. But when you preach the resurrection you are declaring that life has a new spiritual dynamic for the person who believes in Jesus and is

saved. If that dynamic is not being exemplified by other believers in the Church there is a disconnect.

In the first Church unbelievers could see the power of the resurrection working itself out through the lives of the Christians. **Great grace was upon them all** and it was something that drew men and women to the Cross.

The remaining verses of chapter four get more specific about this aspect of selling and sharing, ending with the example of Barnabas.

Acts 4:34 Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold,

Acts 4:35 and laid *them* at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.

The needs were physical and material, so those with possessions met them by selling. Notice the largeness of their generosity. They didn't just have a garage sale; **they sold the garage!**

There are two principles behind their actions:

1. The first principle is that each believer thought of him- or herself as potentially meeting the needs of others. They were sensitive to the needs of others. They were observant, they listened; I'd go so far as to say they sought out needs.
2. The second principle is that they did what they could to meet the needs they became aware of. It involved personal sacrifice. But you get the distinct impression that they did it joyfully.

The poster-boy for their Spirit-led sharing was Barnabas:

Acts 4:36 And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus,

Nicknames can be cool! They can describe a person's nature or character. If we gave you a nickname, what would it be? Son or daughter of encouragement... or of discouragement? Helper... or hinderer? You get the idea!

Barnabas was from the tribe of Levi. Pause on that for a moment. Under God's Law Levites were not allowed to own any property. They were to serve the Lord in the Temple and were to be cared for by the gifts of the people. Now here was Barnabas caring for the people by giving them a gift of property he was not supposed to own.

It's a spiritual jewel dropped in the path of our study. What the Law could not do in getting **Joses** to obey, grace accomplished through **Barnabas** once he was saved. Grace is always a better motivator than law.

These first Christians in this first Church at Jerusalem were alive with the resurrection life of Jesus Christ. You could see it and you could feel it as they ministered by grace one to another. It was nothing short of supernatural.

It was about to be disturbed.

#2 You Might As Well Be Dead
When You Are Lying To The Holy Spirit
(5:1-10)

Let me establish from the start that Ananias and Sapphira were born-again believers in Jesus Christ:

1. Back in verse thirty-two of chapter four it was made clear that this story was dealing with believers. Nothing in the story indicates this couple was unsaved.
2. Even though we're told that Satan filled their hearts, we're also told that they conceived this plan themselves. They weren't possessed, just influenced. Just because you are a believer it doesn't mean you won't listen to the devil and His lies. Jesus looked at Peter, who was resisting Him, and said, **Get behind Me, Satan** (Matthew 16:23), indicating the devil's influence over Peter.
3. Physical sickness and even death is a discipline God sometimes uses on His children. It's mentioned in First Corinthians chapter eleven and in First John chapter five. We should not assume every illness or death is disciplinary; but

neither should we assume God no longer uses illness and even death as a discipline.

4. Finally, lying to the Holy Spirit was the sin that brought them under judgment. Every unbeliever confronted with the Gospel is lying to the Holy Spirit but God doesn't kill them. He is seeking to save them. It is precisely because Ananias and Sapphira were saved that God acted as He did to discipline them.

Acts 5:1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession.

Acts 5:2 And he kept back *part* of the proceeds, his wife also being aware *of it*, and brought a certain part and laid *it* at the apostles' feet.

Was it jealousy that motivated them because they wanted to have the same esteem that was afforded to Barnabas? Was it greed that caused them to withhold a portion? Was it pride because they wanted the accolades of the apostles? Were they trying to get into a position of power and influence in the Church? Yes! And many more sad, dark thoughts could be added.

The contrast is between those filled with the Holy Spirit, like Barnabas, and those who let self force the Spirit out, then conceive their own plans.

Acts 5:3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back *part* of the price of the land for yourself?"

Acts 5:4 While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

First notice what I mentioned earlier. This was **conceived** by them in their hearts. The Bible indicates that you can be filled with the Spirit and then bring forth the fruit of the Spirit. Or you can continue to live according to your flesh and bring forth the works of the flesh. The real impact of Ananias and Sapphira is that they were believers, just like you and I, who chose the flesh over the Spirit. It literally killed them. It will kill us though we go on living.

If God hadn't killed them they may have gone on with their charade for a long time. In some Churches today they would be put in charge of the benevolence ministry or given some other position of influence.

How did Peter know about this? The Holy Spirit gave Peter what the Bible calls a word of knowledge. It is information given to you supernaturally that you either could not or did not discover naturally.

Peter established that God is a respecter of your personal property. Your possessions are yours to do with as you please. You'd be smart to use them to please God – but that is left up to you.

Before we leave these two verses I must mention an important doctrinal point. You already see it. Peter first said that Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit. Then he said Ananias lied to God. Peter believed that the Holy Spirit was God. He believed in what we call the trinity – that God is one existing in three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What happened next probably surprised Peter as much as anyone!

Acts 5:5 Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things.

Acts 5:6 And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried *him* out, and buried *him*.

He was slain by the Spirit! If they had done an autopsy there would have been a natural cause, like a heart attack. But it was God who killed Ananias.

- being changed to bring change -

Some think it strange Ananias was buried without consulting Sapphira. After all, she should have been immediately notified and would have been under normal circumstances. But these were not normal circumstances! Once Ananias was slain by the Spirit I think Peter probably knew he would next confront the wife. Ananias' death was concealed because something spiritually serious was going on.

Young men arose and took Ananias away. How would you like to be on dead-body duty? I'm sure this was not in anyone's job description! A servant does what needs doing.

I'm going to guess that Peter and others prayed about how to handle Sapphira. God directed them. I'm certain they were hoping she'd repent.

Acts 5:7 Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

Acts 5:8 And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much."

Acts 5:9 Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband *are* at the door, and they will carry you out."

Acts 5:10 Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying *her* out, buried *her* by her husband.

Peter acted with authority but there's no reason to think he wasn't crying when he did.

Once again the duty of body removal fell upon **the young men**. Maybe these were guys Peter and the apostles were discipling. They may as well know that ministry can be very difficult. People are not always what they seem and sometimes need to be told things they don't like hearing. In this case they died. More often they want to kill you!

It is not unusual for God to make an strong example at the beginning of a new phase of His dealing with His people:

1. At the dedication of the Tabernacle in the wilderness God struck dead Nadab and Abihu when they offered a non-prescribed offering (Leviticus 10; Numbers 3 & 26).
2. When the city of Jericho fell God instructed the Jews to take no spoil. Achan took some of the spoil. He and his family were found out and killed (Joshua 7).

Ananias and Sapphira were not the last believers ever to lie to the Holy Spirit. It's just that God doesn't always kill us for doing it. We thus end up living a lie.

In a spiritual sense, you would be better off dead than to go on living a lie. Instead of killing you, God calls upon you to examine your own heart. You have tools to help you examine it, notably the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

Think of it like this: The next time you are about to commit that secret sin, or act hypocritically, or pridefully... Think about whether or not you want to be struck dead. *Of course you don't!*

But that isn't your motive for acting with honesty and integrity. Your motive is His love for you. It's not that you don't want to die, but that you want to live alive to God through His Spirit.

It's a quality of life issue. You want the quality of spiritual life exemplified by Barnabas and the others in the first Church.

Miracle Max once said, "There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Mostly dead is slightly alive" (*The Princess Bride*).

We don't want to be slightly alive. We want to be fully alive, filled with the Holy Spirit and then led by Him into spontaneous generosity towards others that spreads grace all over the place.

When we are fully alive, and great grace is obviously upon us, it gives power to our witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

One more thought. Many Churches are being swept-up in the seeker-sensitive movement of Church growth. They try hard to make Church more comfortable for seekers. They don't want to offend them by preaching the Cross or talking about the blood of Jesus.

Being killed by God in the Church is not too seeker-sensitive! But it was genuine and real. And you know what? People want something real, something that can really change them and their lives.

That something is Someone. It's Jesus.