

# Acts

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)*

## **Ananias and Sapphira**

**October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

**Acts 5:1-11**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 5. Here, we find the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

If you were with us last Sunday, then you heard our brother Matt preach on the closing verses of chapter 4 – verses that described a church that was unified, and courageous, and generous. They were selling their possessions and sharing with everyone in need. It was like a little foretaste of heaven!

Well, the story that follows – the story of Ananias and Sapphira – comes across like a little foretaste of hell.

This is a difficult passage. This is a “is that really in the Bible?” passage. This is a wakeup call passage.

One of the tremendous benefits of preaching through Books of the Bible is that it keeps us from skipping over the pieces that we don't like – the pieces that challenge our convictions and preconceptions. I suspect that for many this morning, as I read this text, the God of Acts 5:1-11 will feel foreign and even offensive. And if you were reading your Bible at home, you might just rush past that feeling as quickly as possible. But we won't be rushing past anything this morning. Because we need to know God for WHO HE IS, not who we imagine Him to be. Before we go

any further, I want to stop and invite God by His Spirit to prepare us to hear this as we should.

**Let's pray together.**

Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, <sup>2</sup> and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. <sup>3</sup> But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup> While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." <sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. <sup>6</sup> The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup> After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." <sup>9</sup> But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." <sup>10</sup> Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:1-11 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

As I studied last week and then sat down to write on Tuesday, I found myself burdened with a holy fear. This is the New Testament church. This is the "washed by the blood" church. This is the "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" church. This is the "filled with the Holy Spirit" church. This is a church just like ours. These are a people just like us. A husband and wife brought their sin with them to the sanctuary, and they were carried out in a body bag. This passage frightens me to my core. God does not play games.

We have talked an awful lot over the last few months about how we long to be a Spirit filled church. We have asked Him to bless us with His powerful presence. We want to enjoy the presence of God like we never have before!

But we learn this morning that revivals can produce casualties. As the holy presence of God comes in, sin must go out. Ananias and Sapphira learned this lesson the hard way. But what exactly did they do to provoke the wrath of God? What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?

### What Was The Sin Of Ananias And Sapphira?

At first glance, you might be tempted to think that their sin was that of withholding from God. That's where the story begins, after all. They sold their property, they decided that they would keep some of the proceeds back for themselves, and then God struck them dead. So, is God punishing the sin of greed? Is that the answer? Well, no, because Peter told Ananias:

While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, **was it not at your disposal?** (Acts 5:4a ESV)

As we saw last week, this wave of generosity in Jerusalem was NOT MANDATED. Nobody was required to sell their possessions – including Ananias and Sapphira. It was their land, and they were free to do with it as they pleased.

While greed IS sin, it wasn't the sin that brought judgement here. What, then, was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?

Here it is. Are you ready? Ananias and Sapphira thought that they could lie to God.

They saw the attention that generous people like Barnabas were receiving, and they wanted in on that. They sold their land and realized, "We could keep some of this back for ourselves but pretend that we gave it all. No one would know!" As one commentator notes here:

It is crucial to note that the point is not that God demands our financial accounts be in order, but rather that God hates hypocrisy of any kind, how much more that which is deliberate and designed to *test the Spirit of the Lord*.<sup>1</sup>

THAT was the sin that came under judgement: The sin of hypocrisy.

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad Kempf et al. eds., *New Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1075.

I'm not a mind reader, but I imagine that some of you are wondering, "Well, that doesn't seem that bad... Why would God deal so harshly with such a small sin?"

And it *does* seem small, doesn't it? They were being wonderfully generous, after all. And they had every right to that money. So what if they fibbed? It was a little, white lie. They wanted to impress their peers. They wanted to seem just a little holier than they actually were. They wanted to present nicely to the congregation. To be esteemed. To be admired. Such a small sin! The kind of sin that has probably been committed by some people in this room even just this morning. And that really heightens the shock that we feel as we consider God's response. Look again at verse 5:

When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. <sup>6</sup>The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. (Acts 5:5-6 ESV)

They didn't even inform Ananias' family before they buried him! These believers were shaken with holy fear. Ananias had just been struck down by the Living God right before their eyes! So, startled and terrified, they disposed of his body the way that we would dispose of an animal infected with a contagious disease – they removed him and buried him as quickly as they possibly could lest God strike the assembly again. Three hours later, Sapphira suffered the same fate.

"But..." our minds object, "But that doesn't sound like Jesus!" I feel that objection. But then I read Matthew 23 and I realize that this sounds EXACTLY like Jesus. Listen to the way that Jesus denounces the sin of hypocrisy:

"Woe to you, you whitewashed tombs – presentable on the outside but full of dead man's bones! You blind guides! You who put heavy burdens on others that you can't even carry yourself! You who love your seats of honour! You who pray your long prayers to impress your peers! You who pretend to make disciples but who actually make little pharisees who are twice as much a child of hell as you! You who strain out a gnat but who swallow a camel!" He concluded:

You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?  
(Matthew 23:33 ESV)

If we really, truly listened to Jesus' teaching, Acts 5 wouldn't surprise us at all. God hates the sin of hypocrisy.

But that leads us to a bigger question: Why were Ananias and Sapphira struck down?

### **Why Were Ananias And Sapphira Struck Down?**

Let's be honest: Some of us have committed a form of this sin just this morning! There are some people in this room who are putting on a charade. And you know it. You are trying to impress people with your righteousness, but you are concealing a secret sin. God sees, and God knows, and the same God who struck down Ananias and Sapphira is watching your hypocrisy right now.

And yet, you are still standing. Why is that? Why did God deal so severely with Ananias and Sapphira? First, God struck them down:

#### **1. Because cracks in the foundation are a really big deal**

We will never understand this passage if we skim past verse 3. Look there again:

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

Remember, this is the first New Testament church. This is the first Holy-Spirit-filled church. With Christ as the cornerstone, a new temple is being built. This early church was setting a trajectory for the generations that would follow. So, Satan attempted to insert a devastating crack in the foundation.

Thus far in the book of Acts, we have witnessed the attacks on the church that come from the outside world. But here, we find a new danger. Ananias and Sapphira brought their gift to the church in the same way that the Greeks brought their Trojan Horse to the city of Troy. It looked innocent – even generous – from the outside. But it was filled with sin that would wreak havoc from within.

What better way to destroy the unity of the church than to create a culture of distrust? We've witnessed the devastation of this attack in our own culture. The endless scandals and the rampant hypocrisy have robbed the North American church of her integrity. Your neighbour does not trust the church anymore, and for good reason. All of that sin has robbed us of our powerful witness – and the Devil tried to do the same thing in the Jerusalem church on day one.

He also tried to slip a spirit of self-righteousness into the congregation. If the Devil can't stop the church from doing good, then he can at least distort their *motivation* for doing good. Charity that is done to bring glory to God changes the world. But charity that is done to bring glory to YOU is repulsive. As self-righteousness grows, evangelism dies.

The sin of hypocrisy takes our worship and turns it into a weapon against our witness. How many young people today have bitter memories of how their self-righteous dad treated their mom like garbage all week long but then stood with hands held high on Sunday morning?

Ananias and Sapphira – led by Satan himself – were about to weaponize worship. And if they had been allowed to follow through, they would have set a crack in the foundation that would have all but ruined the witness of the church. They were struck down because cracks in the foundation are a really big deal. But that's not the only reason. Ananias and Sapphira were struck down:

## **2. Because God is a consuming fire in our midst**

One of the things that we have been celebrating and delighting in as we have worshipped our way through Acts is the powerful presence of God in and amongst His people. As the tongues of fire fell upon the disciples in the upper room, every member of the church became the place where the world can meet with the Living God! In the past, God's presence was only accessible in the holy of holies, but suddenly WE became the temple! Through His Spirit, the Creator and Sustainer of everyone and everything took up residence in US! What power! What glory!

And this Jerusalem church was experiencing the presence of God in a *particularly powerful way!* Day after day, they prayed together and pleaded with God to FILL them with His Spirit! And that's just what He did! He filled His church with His power, and they saw signs and wonders and conversions and baptisms that make our hearts sing!

God was in their midst!

But, here we are reminded that while it is GLORIOUS to live in the powerful presence of the living God, it is not entirely safe. As the author to the Hebrews warns us:

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup> **for our God is a consuming fire.** (Hebrews 12:28-29 ESV)

We had a fire the other night, and as I carelessly reached in to move some of the branches, my hand felt the scorching heat and I had to pull it back quickly before I hurt myself. Similarly, when the Consuming Fire is in the midst of His people, those who are careless will feel the heat of God's holiness.

In the same way that Nadab and Abihu were struck down when they wandered carelessly into the holy of holies – in the same way that Uzzah was struck down when he touched the Ark of the Covenant – so too were Ananias and Sapphira struck down when they attempted to sneak their sin into the powerful presence of the living God.

In the verses following this story we read:

Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. (Acts 5:12a ESV)

When we think of these early signs and wonders, our minds gravitate to the tongues of fire and the healings, but we conveniently forget that God's judgement of Ananias and Sapphira was one of the wonders that He performed. As one commentator notes:

The blasting and the blessing were the acts of the Holy Spirit in His administration of the work and the will of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 147.

Hear that this morning: Both the BLASTING and the BLESSING were from God! Both the blasting and the blessing were the overflow of His powerful presence. Both the blasting and the blessing were signs that the holy God was dwelling amidst His people.

Let's make sure that we learn this lesson today. As we cry out for a greater filling of the Holy Spirit – as we seek to catch the fire – let's make sure that we don't forget Acts 5:1-11, lest we receive something that we were not prepared for. The same Spirit who brings the blessing brings the blasting, and His presence will be the death of those who have made peace with hidden sin.

Do you remember when the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant and tried to store the God of heaven and earth with their idols? They broke out in tumours, their idols came crumbling to the floor, and a plague of disease infested rats swept through the land. They sent the Ark away as quickly as they had brought it in, because they realized that they were unfit to live in the presence of the Holy God.

Well, the church in Jerusalem is being confronted with a similar situation here. This episode served as a dramatic wakeup call for the church. Verse 11 explains:

And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:11 ESV)

Make no mistake, revivals are glorious, but they are not without casualties. God struck down Ananias and Sapphira because God is a Consuming Fire.

I want to point out one last reason before we come in for our conclusion, and this last reason is the most frightening of them all. God struck down Ananias and Sapphira:

### **3. Because our hearts are as open books before the Lord**

If you hear nothing else this morning, hear this: You can fool me, and you can fool the person sitting next to you, but you cannot fool the Living God.

Ananias walked into the assembly with his head held high and his offering in hand. He was confident that the fellow worshipers in the room would be unable to see through the charade. But he had forgotten that his display did not simply need to fool his brothers and sisters. Peter looked him in the eye and said:

You have not lied to man but to God. (Acts 5:4b ESV)

When Sapphira marched in three hours later, she went along with the lie, and Peter asked:

“How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? (Acts 5:9a ESV)

Peter essentially asks: “Did you forget Whose church this is? Do you think this is some sort of social club? Your charade – your deception – your hypocrisy – was not simply directed against us. You are attempting to lie to God! And you can’t.”

As I studied and prayed through this passage, my mind continuously raced to 1 Corinthians 11 – to the extent that I feel a deep urgency to show you this connection. I want you to turn ahead with me to 1 Corinthians 11. This passage will be familiar for you if you have been with us for any length of time. In it, the Apostle Paul warns the believers in Corinth not to partake of the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner. Remember, he is writing here to BELIEVERS. Here’s what he says:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup> Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. <sup>30</sup> **That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.** (1 Corinthians 11:27-30 ESV)

“Some have died!” We learn here that this episode with Ananias and Sapphira was not an isolated incident. Decades later in the city of Corinth, members of the church were SICK and DYING because they were abusing the Lord’s Supper. Like Ananias and Sapphira, they were carelessly bringing their sin into the presence of God. They were living like hypocrites, and they were struck down by the Lord. Paul goes on to explain:

<sup>31</sup> But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. <sup>32</sup> But when we are judged by the Lord, **we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.** (1 Corinthians 11:31-32 ESV)

Do you see that? If they would have judged themselves rightly, they would not have experienced God's judgement in the way that they did! As one commentator explains:

The point is that something as simple as more self-evaluation, more self-examination, could help us avoid divine judgement by leading us to catch and correct ourselves before God decided to take matters into his own hands and bring about a very undesirable external motivation that might lead us to finally correct what we had consistently ignored. To worship God is also to expose oneself to the extreme danger that comes from treating what is holy as though it were profane.<sup>3</sup>

For Ananias and Sapphira, and for these Christians in Corinth, their hypocrisy, their carelessness, and their ignorance of God's holiness had set them on a trajectory to eternal condemnation. They had set their course, but their heart was an open book before the Lord. God saw where they were headed, so He SPARED them by stopping them in their tracks before they fell off the cliff altogether.

Does your view of God have a category for this? This is in the NEW TESTAMENT!

Ananias and Sapphira made peace with their sin, and the sin that they had made peace with was going to do more damage than they could possibly understand. So, in His mercy, God struck them down before they could put the trojan horse into position. I believe that He does the same thing today.

When the Spirit of God moves powerfully amongst His people, it is glorious, and it is wonderful, but our passage this morning reminds that it is not safe. He will protect His church from those who would make cracks in the foundation. He is a consuming fire in our midst. And our hearts are as open books before Him.

And that prompts me to ask one concluding question:

## **What Now?**

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<sup>3</sup> Roy E. Ciampa & Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter To The Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 556-557.

This is a text that demands a response. Look again at verse 11:

And **great fear** came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:11 ESV)

Is there anyone here who is feeling a great fear? Fearful news demands a response. If you visited your doctor, and she told you that you had an aggressive cancer that would spread to all your vital organs if left any longer, you would be a fool to walk out of the office without booking your next appointment. News like that produces urgency.

Well, in the same way, if you are here this morning and the Holy Spirit is revealing a “cancer” in your spiritual life, you would be a fool to walk away without doing business with the Lord. This text demands a simple, honest response:

## 1. Repent

Is there an Ananias in this room? Is there a Sapphira? Is the Spirit pressing on that conviction right now? THAT is mercy. Lay hold of it. Let that conviction drive you to repentance before God is forced to use something more severe to pull you out of your sin. Repent. Let go of your sin. Confess it to God. Confess it to your spouse. Confess it to your friend. Bring the darkness out into the light where it will shrivel up and DIE – but don’t carry that darkness with you any longer.

Do we want to experience the powerful filling of the Spirit in our lives and in this church? Then our pet sins have to go! That grudge you’ve been holding onto has to go! That chip on your shoulder has to go! That sinful relationship has to go! That addiction has to go! That self-righteousness has to go! That pride has to go! That hypocrisy HAS TO GO! With fear and trembling, confess your sin to God and be DONE WITH IT IN JESUS’ NAME!

As G. Campbell Morgan explains:

Either Ananias or the Spirit must go. The two cannot live side-by-side.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 154.

Repent. But don't despair.

Despair is the wrong response. The same Devil who convinced Ananias and Sapphira to make little of their sin would also convince you that your sin is irredeemable. I suspect that he's whispering that lie into someone's ear right now.

He's telling you that you should have stayed home. He's telling you that you'll never be free of your sin. He's telling you that Jesus has written you off.

But the Devil is a LIAR! Don't listen to his filth. Fight his lies with the truth. Jesus said:

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>32</sup> I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:31b-32 ESV)

Jesus came for sinners. Jesus came for me. Jesus came for you. But he came to call us to REPENTANCE. The devil would drive you to despair this morning, but Jesus would drive you to the altar. Jesus would bring you to the cross – to surrender your sin and to see afresh your great Saviour!

We're going to do something this morning that we rarely do. At this time, **I'm going to invite the worship team up to join me.**

If the Spirit of God is convicting you this morning, then I want to challenge you to respond. As the worship team leads us in two closing songs, I want to invite you to come forward to the altar where you can confess your sin to God and to the elders who will be here to pray with you. And, to the rest, if one of your friends, or your spouse chooses to come forward, I want you to invite you to come with them. Listen to their confession. Pray with them. Point them to Jesus.

Enough with the show. Enough with the hypocrisy. Enough with living in the dark. 1 John 1 says:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. <sup>7</sup> But if we walk in the light, as he is in the

light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. <sup>8</sup> If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:5-9 ESV)

I want to invite you to make your way forward as I close us in prayer.