

BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

by Mario Seiglie

NT-48 3-15-2014



ACTS 5 – 6 ANANIAS & SAPPHIRA; APOSTLES ARRESTED; DEACONS

We begin this study in Acts 5 with Luke recounting the first months of the Christian Church, where he mentions how Barnabas became one of the Church leaders. He had wholeheartedly given what he could to support the Church. Unfortunately, not all had that attitude and we now have the first incident of how some Church members tried to deceive the apostles.

Luke writes, "But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. 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. 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? 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.' Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him. Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter answered her, 'Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?' She said, 'Yes, for so much.' 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.' 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. So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things. And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly" (Acts 5:1-13).

First of all, Luke is contrasting Barnabas' sincere giving with Ananias and Sapphiras' deceptive withholding of what they had publicly committed to the Church. Since this is the beginning of the Church, it was important to keep it pure from the start.

It is interesting that Luke uses the same verb "keep back" that is used in the Greek Old Testament (*The Septuagint* or LXX) about Achan's sin at Jericho which brought a curse upon Israel.

As *Expositor's Commentary* mentions, "Luke's use of the verb *nosphizo* ('kept back'...), which in the LXX heads the account in Joshua 7:1-26 of Achan's misappropriation of part of what had been dedicated to God, implies that Luke meant to draw a parallel between the sin of Achan as the Israelites began their conquest of Canaan and the sin of Ananias and Sapphira as the church began its mission--both incidents coming under the immediate and drastic judgment of God and teaching a sobering lesson. And this is very likely how the early church saw the incident as well."

Secondly, Peter was given spiritual discernment to determine how serious this breach of confidence had been. It is important to realize after this incident that, "none of the rest dared join them [the apostles]" (Acts 5:13). It seems Ananias and Sapphira, as Simon Magus would later attempt, wanted to "buy" their way into receiving a high position in the Church, called simony.

Thirdly, some have used this passage to indicate the Holy Spirit is a person, when it says they had lied "to the Holy Spirit." Yet, this section actually does the opposite, for it equates "lying to the Holy Spirit" (vs. 3) as lying "to God" (vs. 4), and later "to the Spirit of the Lord" (vs. 9). So we see it is talking about the Spirit of the *Lord* (Jesus Christ) and not of some other person.

Lastly, this incident also shows how candid the Bible is and that Church members were not perfect. As Barclay mentions, "This is one of the stories which demonstrate the almost stubborn honesty of the Bible. It might well have been left out because it shows that even in the early Church there were very imperfect Christians; but the Bible refuses to present an idealized picture of anything."

Once God's warning was noted, the Church continued to grow. Luke continues, "And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing

by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed" (Acts 5:14-16).

At the beginning, God greatly blessed the Church with powerful miracles and it reminded them of the time of great miracles when God first led the congregation of Israel from Egypt into the Promised Land. God has also prophesied that great miracles will again take place when the two witnesses rise up before Christ's return.

The NIT Commentary brings out, "Peter's shadow was as efficacious a medium of healing power as the hem of his Master's robe had been. No wonder that the people in general sounded the apostle's praises and that the number of believers increased. Of those who did not believe, however, none ventured to attach himself to the community: the fate of Ananias and Sapphira showed how perilous pretended or half-hearted adhesion might be" (p. 118).

Of course, miracles often bring persecution because of jealous religious leaders, as it did here.

Luke records, "Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 'Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.' And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught. But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, saying, 'Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!' Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. So one came and told them, saying, 'Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!' Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without

violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, saying, 'Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!' But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: 'We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.' When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them. Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while. And he said to them: 'Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God.' And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:17-42).

This is the second time the apostles were arrested, and the Jewish leaders were determined to put a stop to their preaching and great miracles. They put them in jail, but God intervened. The term "the angel of the Lord," usually refers to the Word--Jesus Christ Himself.

Expositor's explains, "The 'angel of the Lord' (*angelos kyriou*) is the LXX term for the Hebrew 'Angel of Yahweh' (*malak YHWH*), which denotes God himself in his dealings with men (cf. Ex. 3:2, 4, 7). While the Greek *angelos*, like the Hebrew *malak*, may simply mean 'messenger,' here it denotes the *presence or agency of God himself*."

So God opened the locked cell doors and told them to continue preaching in the Temple "all the words of this life," or more accurately, "the full message of this new life." It truly is a new way of life by following God's Word and learning about the coming of the kingdom of God (see Acts 1:3).

Notice the important point made by Peter that "we must obey God rather than men." When religious leaders stray from faithfully teaching and following God's Word and laws, we must put God first and not follow them anymore. As Jesus said in Luke 14:26, "Those who come to me cannot be my disciples unless they love me more than they love father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and themselves as well" (GNB version).

Peter also mentioned God gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him—not just those who profess His name but think the law is annulled.

By the way, this Gamaliel, who prevented the Sadducees from killing the apostles, was a famous Jewish Pharisee, known as Raban Gamaliel the Elder. He was also the son or grandson of Hillel, who founded the Jewish school of Hillel, from which modern Judaism descends.

So for the time being, the apostles were left alone and Luke focuses on another problem that the Jerusalem church faced. He mentions, "Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy

Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:1-7).

Here we see Church government at work, with the twelve apostles leading, but getting everyone involved. The problem was that there were two groups of Jewish Christian brethren, those born mostly in Israel, known as Hebrews, who spoke Aramean and those generally born outside Israel who spoke Greek. Because of the language difference and country of origin, they tended to socialize in different groups.

The NIT Commentary mentions, "In the Jewish world as a whole, there was some tension between 'Hebrews' and Hellenists, and this tension survived between members of the two groups who had acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah and been incorporated in the messianic community. The tension came to a head in what might appear a trifling matter. As daily allocations were made to the poorer members of the church from the common pool to which the wealthier members had contributed their estates, complaints began to arise that one group was being favored at the expense of the other. Widows naturally formed a considerable proportion of the poorer members of the church, and the Hellenistic widows were said to be at a disadvantage in comparison with the 'Hebrew' widows, perhaps because the distribution of charity was in the hands of the 'Hebrews.'"

The apostles, being guided by Jesus' gentle spirit, did not want to dedicate their time to dealing with physical chores and rather keep their focus on the spiritual -- prayer, pastoral and evangelistic efforts. So they asked the brethren to pick out those they considered best qualified for this physical job. They chose seven godly men, some who had Greek names, showing they were of the 'Hellenist' group, to help administer the funds and food supplies fairly to both groups. These men would be later known as deacons.