

## The Book of Acts Study Guide

### Chapters 5-6

#### 5:1-11

In order to understand what happened to Ananias and Sapphira, we have to recall the events that immediately preceded it in chapter 4. The people were filled with the Spirit (4:31) and the needs of the congregation were being met by people selling property and giving the proceeds to the Apostles for them to use it as they saw fit (vv. 34-35). As a result, they experienced a powerful witness and grace in their lives (v. 33). Ananias and Sapphira sold some property as well. Since it was an offering, they were under no obligation to give the full amount to the Apostles. But they lied to the Holy Spirit because they gave the impression that the value of their gift was the full amount of the sale (v. 8). They were probably trying to make themselves appear to be more generous than they actually were, and they were envious of the high regard that people like Barnabas were receiving for their gifts (4:36).

This extreme discipline was necessary because the character of the believing community had to have a foundation of righteousness. That called for discipline when that foundation was violated. As evidence that righteousness was indeed maintained, v. 11 says that the fear (of God) was upon the people.

Some people claim that the Old Testament is about wrath and judgment, but the New Testament is about love and grace. But this incident shows that after the Cross, God still does not accept sinful behavior and He is always a God of justice. The timing of judgment is not always immediate, but as God had declared through Moses: “He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished” (Ex. 34:7). It seems in this incident that Ananias and Sapphira were unrepentant for their sin, and thus unforgiven and still guilty, so that the judgment was just.

Notice also in v. 4 that lying to the Holy Spirit is lying to God, which is evidence regarding the triune nature of God.

#### 5:12-16

v. 12 – This is the second time Solomon’s portico (KJV porch) is mentioned as the meeting place of the Messianic believers (cf 3:11). There was a porch upheld by columns that surrounded the Temple Mount. Solomon’s portico was the portion on the eastern side toward the Mt of Olives.

v. 13 – Non-believers still held them in high esteem. This result can be attributed to the way that the Apostles interacted with the community. Their message was simple—Yeshua is the Messiah, believe in Him. Their actions were also simple—care for the needy, especially in terms of restoring health.

vv 14-16 – The great number of healings is an indication once again of the capability of the Apostles who were uniquely given authority by Yeshua to heal every kind of disease and sickness (Mat 10:1). So this is the expected result of having that authority. And we need to be reminded that such authority has not been granted to all believers. This passage in Acts demonstrates the power of God when His authority is given. But it should not be interpreted as a justification for others without such authority.

Notice also the nature and extent of the healings. Up to this point in the book of Acts

there have been healings of an otherwise impossible nature:

- A man who had been lame from birth and for over 40 years suddenly leaping about (3:2-8; 4:22).
- The sick and demon-possessed here in 5:15-16.
- And later on there will be other miraculous occurrences like in chapter 9 where Peter heals someone who was paralyzed for nine years and raises a woman from the dead.

The extent of the healings is likewise significant. The people in need of healing responded positively to the commands and acts of the Apostles 100% of the time. In the same way, we should expect to see the same kind of results today if the same authority is present—naturally impossible results that are effective 100% of the time, not someone feeling better from an occasional minor ailment. However that does not discount the reality of God still healing as the Spirit moves and the saints intercede for those in need. But these are separate matters altogether and should not be confused by this passage dealing with a limited context.

### 5:17-32

Just like in the previous chapter, the Temple leaders were disturbed by the power that was being demonstrated by the Apostles. So they had them thrown in jail again. But unlike chapter 4 when they were released from jail by the Temple leaders, this time they were released miraculously. The command by the angel in v. 20 is purposeful, and not just to make an impression that strengthens faith, but empowers the hearer's witness to other people.

- v. 25 – This is a glimpse of the humor of God, for the Apostles went immediately back to doing that which they had been forbidden to do, regardless of the efforts of man to prevent it.
- v. 27 – In any event they were brought before the Sanhedrin, or as it is called here, “the Council.” In those days the Sanhedrin was dominated by the Sadducees. They had control of the office of the High Priest, and the great majority of the members were from that sect. So the issues were still the same as when Yeshua was alive and proclaiming the Gospel:
  - v. 30 – that Yeshua was raised from the dead, which conflicts with the Sadducees' denial of the resurrection.
  - v. 31 – that Yeshua is God, because He possesses the divine attributes of being exalted, being ruler and savior, and He grants repentance and forgiveness.

Again, as in chapter 4, the Apostles were told to stop speaking about Yeshua. Their response in v. 29 is the way anyone who knows the truth will act—it is the issue of obeying God over men. They were obeying God specifically because just prior to Yeshua's ascension into heaven, He commanded them to be His witnesses (1:8). And here in v. 20 the angel of the Lord, whose responsibility was to communicate a message from God, and carried the same authority as from God directly, told them to “speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this (Messianic) life.” So they were just following through on what they had been commanded to do.

### 5:33-42

It makes sense in v. 33 that the leaders would respond in a similar violent manner to what they did with Yeshua, by wanting to kill them. But in v. 34 Gamaliel intervened. Here we learn that he was one of the few Pharisees in the Sanhedrin, and that he was called a “teacher of the Torah (Law).” The term used here (*nomodidaskalos*) is used only three times in Scripture, and it

describes someone who was so highly learned in the Torah, that he could give expert opinion on theological matters, and his opinion would carry much weight in decisions. So, as we are told here, he was “respected by all the people.”

But there is more that we know about Gamaliel from historical sources, including the Talmud. He was the grandson of Hillel, who was one of the two most influential rabbis of the second temple period (the other being Shammai) who were both alive during the years prior to Yeshua beginning His ministry. They took opposing points of view on a number of subjects, with Shammai generally taking a stricter position and Hillel tended to be more lenient. Hillel was known for applying the principle of loving your neighbor to all aspects of the moral law of Torah. His most notable quote was: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn” (*Shabbat 31a*). So in that respect, Hillel and Yeshua both taught what is now called the Golden Rule. That was the tradition in which Gamaliel was trained and guided his own teachings. As a result, he resisted impulsive actions like the Sanhedrin was proposing. Instead, he offered an alternative approach that was reasonable and, I dare say, godly.

- vv. 36-37 – He presented evidence of two men—Theudas and Judas who led revolts against Rome that “came to nothing,” meaning they failed and were no longer a problem.
- vv. 38-39 – His reasoning was that if it was just of men it would fail, but if it was of God you could not stop it. Today the perspective of history confirms that it was not be stopped, so it was indeed of God.
- v. 40 – Gamaliel’s advice won over the council, but they couldn’t resist the temptation to send the Apostles on their way with a flogging, which I suppose demonstrated their version of justice.
- v. 41 – But the Apostles interpreted that as an honor for being able to suffer in Yeshua’s name.
- v. 42 – And then they resumed what they had been doing all along—proclaiming Yeshua as Messiah. This raises the issue of persecution for believers. Generally speaking, there are two kinds of persecution:
  - Persecution for being faithful.
  - Persecution for being foolish.

Faithful means remaining truthful and focused on “teaching and preaching Yeshua as the Messiah” and being willing to suffer for upholding the name of Yeshua. Foolish means being reckless with the truth, going off on secondary issues and making sure that others know that you are suffering.

### 6:1-7

This is the first time we hear about any kind of dispute among the believers. It is over the treatment of the widows in one part of the community. In those days, before the Gospel was taken to the Gentiles and they became integrated into the community, the only believers were Jews by birth or conversion. But there were still two factions present—what they called Hellenistic Jews and native Jews. That either meant Greek-speaking and Hebrew-speaking Jews or culturally Greek and culturally Hebrew Jews. This much we know for certain—the language and culture of Greece had a great influence on the civilized world, including the land of Judea and the city of Jerusalem.

We see this in the story of Hanukkah where the threat of Hellenization being imposed by the Syrian Seleucid Greeks was opposed by the Maccabees. But in spite of the reforms brought about by the Maccabees, eventually much of the Jewish way of life became Hellenized, including the adoption of the Greek language. That was true in those days described in Acts.

It is also apparent that the Hebrew-speaking believers looked down on their Hellenized brothers and sisters in the Lord, perhaps considering them to be sell-outs who failed to remain pure in their observance of the Hebrew language and culture. So it seems that their widows did not receive the same care as the native Hebrews. And that is an expression of there being two classes of believers in the community, which was never consistent with the message of Yeshua, or even the Torah, which called for “one law” for the native and the alien alike (Num 15:29).

It is not stated directly here, but the context shows that the Apostles wanted to correct this improper situation. In fact, they may not even have been aware of the situation because they were preoccupied with all the things that we have been reading about up to this point. So they appointed seven men to take on the service of caring for these women. All seven of them have Greek names, so it is reasonable to conclude that they were from the Hellenized Jewish community. Their role is the precursor for the more formal office of deacon (meaning “servant”) that would later be defined and developed by Paul (1 Tim 3:8-13).

This passage teaches that there should not be different classes of people within the believing community, where some are considered to be more worthy of respect or care than others. We need to resist the temptation to classify one another as less worthy of God’s favor because we fail to meet a certain standard of religious or cultural compliance. Instead we need to find room for everyone, and then to engage in natural conversations about our differences and convictions, just like a family does. Unfortunately, our convictions have the potential of moving us to break down the unity we need in the body, as this passage attests.

- v. 7 – also shows that when godly wisdom and grace prevails in our relationships, powerful results will happen—the Word of God will spread, our numbers will grow, and even people you least expect to believe, like the *cohanim*/priests of that day, will turn to Yeshua in faith.

### 6:8-15

Stephen, one of the seven men appointed to care for the widows, was doing a great work for the Lord. And he was opposed by a group of Jews who were associated with what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (KJV – Libertines). In those days people tended to gather for worship with people that they shared some kind of commonality, much like today. The term freedmen means people who were once slaves. It is likely a reference to Jews who were taken as slaves by the Romans led by Pompey in 63 BC when they gained control of Jerusalem (Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 23). Those Jews were later released from slavery in Rome and they or their descendents made their way back to Jerusalem where they founded this synagogue. So they were substantially Hellenized and in this synagogue they were joined by other Jews from cities in the diaspora—Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia—all of which were Greek-speaking communities.

In spite of their Hellenistic orientation, their zeal for what they believed was no different from than that of the Sadducees and Pharisees. In this case they took out their aggression in defending their beliefs on Stephen. Like them, he was a Hellenized Jew. He may even have been a member of their synagogue at one time. Regardless, he was seen as a traitor. So they took him to appear before the Sanhedrin.

False witnesses testified that Stephen spoke in support of Yeshua's statements that they considered to be blasphemous. The first charge was that Yeshua threatened to destroy the temple, which He never got a chance to do because they had Him killed. It is clear that Yeshua made statements that were reinterpreted into that kind of threat. He predicted that the temple would be destroyed (Mat 24:2). But that was not a threat of His own actions, it was a prophecy of what would come later at the hands of the Romans. He also used the word "temple" in a metaphorical manner, referring to His death and resurrection, but His audience misinterpreted it as a reference to the physical temple (Jn 2:19-21).

This issue informs us today that the things spoken to non-believers regarding spiritual issues will often be misinterpreted. So we need to be clear in how we communicate. But even so, many people will simply not understand because they do not want to understand, and they will intentionally twist our words.

The second charge was that Yeshua spoke against the Torah. But at no time did Yeshua ever contradict any aspect of the Torah as it was given by Moses. Without question it is true that He was highly critical of the burdensome additions and distortions of the Torah that the elders of Israel had created over the centuries. So if that was a capital offense in that society, His execution would be legally allowed. But legal does not mean just or godly. As the Apostles declared, "We must obey God rather than men." In reality the society and its laws had become corrupted, and the testimony was based on lies. So that is an indicator that evil was dominating, even in a supposed religious setting.

Ironically many Christians today have adopted this hostile position and would agree that Yeshua spoke against the Torah. And if they hold Messianic believers guilty for living and worshiping in this manner, to be consistent, they need to hold Yeshua guilty as well. Ultimately, this battle is not over the pure Word of God, but about the words of men who have assumed unwarranted authority for themselves.

Lastly, it is important to note the distinction between the way that two very different groups addressed a similar issue. In the first part of this chapter a dispute involving Hellenized Jews was resolved graciously and peacefully. In the last part of the chapter, a dispute involving Hellenized Jews produced lies and, as the subsequent chapters will show, a most tragic outcome. The former was guided by the Spirit of God, and the latter was guided by the religion of men.