

The Acts and Torah of the Apostles Study Guide

Chapter 5

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 (v. 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 about the full amount that they received, thus giving the impression of greater generosity than was warranted.

What was their sin that was so grievous? First, and foremost, in verse 3, God gave discernment to Peter that the heart of Ananias was filled with Satan, which means that his thinking was corrupted and that he was under the dominion of Satan, not God. In other words, Ananias was not a redeemed believer in Yeshua, but he wanted to be involved in the community for some reason, much in the same way that unbelievers are often present in congregations today. It seems reasonable to conclude that his wife Sapphira was also an unbeliever because she acted in the same untruthful manner in verse 8. So, this is not about believers being punished for lying within the body. These are unbelievers acting in a way that is consistent with their corrupted nature, as evidenced by their lies and likely their envy of the attention that that people like Barnabas were receiving because of their sacrificial gifts (4:36).

Notice also, in verse 3, that their sin was not just about lying to other people, they were lying to the Holy Spirit, and then in verse 4, Peter declares that they lied to God, which is an affirmation of the deity of the Holy Spirit. But we can recall how Yeshua taught that our actions in regard to other people are no different than doing them directly to God: “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me” (Mat 25:40). As unbelievers, it is likely that Ananias and Sapphira did not understand that connection and they thought that no one, including God, would ever know, but they were literally dead wrong.

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, verse 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 that is not true whatsoever, because all of those attributes can be found in every part of the Bible. To this very day, 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. This result also had a profound impact on the believers, because v. 11 says that the fear (of God) was upon the people. And that would have contributed to a commitment to righteousness within the believing community.

5:12-16

- v. 12 – This is the second time Solomon’s portico (also called the colonnade or 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. And their actions were also simple—care for the needy, especially in terms of restoring health.
- v. 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.
- Later, 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. The high priest mentioned in verse 17 could either be Caiaphas, who was the current one, or Annas who served 15 years earlier, but continued to be very influential. Regardless, in verse 18, it appears that all of the apostles were imprisoned. But unlike chapter 4 when Peter and John were released from jail by the Temple leaders, this time they were released miraculously by an angel. The command by the angel in verse 20 is purposeful, and not just to make an impression that strengthens faith, but to empower people for witnessing to others.

- 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 verse 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 verse 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 even 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, thus demonstrating 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.