

Divine Judgment and Dynamic Evangelism
Acts 5:1-42
by Dellena Ludwig

The life of the church as described in the end of Acts chapter 4 seemed ideal. How wonderful that no one claimed possessions as being their own, but rather, they shared everything that they had, so that no one lacked anything. The believers could listen to the apostles teach every day, recalling all they had experienced while following Jesus. The sick and needy were cared for as the congregation functioned like a family to see to everyone's needs.

Such a marvelous spirit of generosity flowed over each person that they were truly functioning as one body. The believers were sensitive to the moving of the Holy Spirit, and through Him, sensitive to the needs of the body.

Those in need surely expressed their appreciation for this generosity. Acts 4:36 and 37 described one man, named Barnabas who was known as the "son of encouragement," because he sold a field and brought that money to lay before the apostles. Perhaps the praise and thanks Barnabas received motivated others to also bring generous offerings for the church.

Chapter five of Acts showed that not all of those thinking of bringing an offering were altruistic. Some had ulterior motives in their minds. But the Holy Spirit was also teaching the new believers that their relationship with God was more important than their reputations among men.

Acts chapter 5 is divided into four lessons from the Holy Spirit.

1. Lies to the Holy Spirit - verses 1-11
2. Miracles through the Holy Spirit – verses 12-16
3. Released by the Holy Spirit – verses 17-33
4. Emboldened in the Holy Spirit - verses 34-42

Acts 5:1 opens these lessons by introducing a couple who followed the practice of other believers, by bringing their offering, but with a catch. "Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge, he kept back part of the money for himself but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet." [Acts 5:1,2]

For Jewish people at this time, the history of bringing an offering was prescribed in the Law. Offerings were required as sacrifices for guilt offerings, burnt offerings, grain offerings and any sin offering. When the people of Israel attended feasts they also were to bring first-fruit offerings or animal offerings depending on the feast. Tithes were also set at a certain percent of wealth.

Leviticus described the proper offerings to bring and how they were to be offered to God. There was also a fellowship offering. It was an expression of thankfulness to God in the shape of a special loaf of bread along with a meat offering.

The offerings the people were used to doing, were all given at the temple and mediated by the priests. But the offerings being given to the early church were different. These were set before the apostles and used directly to answer specific needs of believers. This seemed more personal than the required offerings at the temple.

Ananias and his wife watched in awe as people like Barnabas gave generously. But somehow they didn't give praise to God for these gifts. Rather they saw praise going to the givers. Perhaps they wanted such praise for themselves, or they wanted the notoriety among believers their gift would bring.

So, they collaborated to sell one of their properties but wanted to keep part of the sale price for themselves, while giving the rest publicly to the apostles. They were planning to give this offering to show themselves as being above others in generosity but didn't want to sacrifice their own security.

We need to understand God's principles for giving. Ananias and Sapphira could have kept the entire amount of this sale. It was their property. They were not commanded to sell it.

God's law encouraged His people to be generous to help the poor and needy. Proverbs 22:9 stated: "The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor." [Proverbs 22:9]

Instructions about giving in this new congregation of the church were just being formulated. The principles were in the Old Testament that they knew; but now giving was developing on an as needed basis.

Later the letter to the Corinthians would help people understand giving monetarily to the church. "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." [2 Corinthians 9:7,8]

However, this couple wanted admiration from people and to be held in high regard by the congregation of believers, not necessarily to receive blessings from God. They wanted the praise of generosity, but not the pain of depriving themselves.

Therefore, when Ananias brought a portion of the sale of his property to the apostles, he tried to pretend he was giving the entire amount. He and his wife thought the apostles and the church would be none the wiser about their deception.

But the Holy Spirit revealed to Peter the full motives behind Ananias' gift. "Then Peter said, 'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.'" [Acts 5:3,4]

The word translated "kept for yourself" here also holds the meaning of "purloining" or "stealing" as in Titus 2:10. This husband and wife chose to give a part of their property as a gift while stealing the other part for themselves, all while pretending to give with an open hand.

If Ananias and Sapphira had every right to make their gift as large or small as they wished, how did this incident become such a grave sin? Ellicott's Commentary on this passage answers this question. "Ananias had not been bound by any rule of the Church to such a gift. At every stage he was free to act as he thought best; and had he brought part as part, or even brought nothing, he would have been free from any special blame. As it was, the attempt to obtain the reputation of saintliness without the reality of sacrifice, involved him in the guilt at once of sacrilege, though there had been no formal consecration, and of perjury, though there had been no formulated oath." [Ellicott's Commentary; on Acts 5:4; Bible Hub]

Matthew Henry stated on this passage, "The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was that they were ambitious of being thought eminent disciples, when they were not true disciples." [Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary; on Acts 5:4; Bible Hub]

This supposition seems to be validated by Sapphira's actions that followed. Ananias fell down dead and was carried out to be buried. (v.5) Then, after some time, Sapphira came to stand among the disciples. "About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, 'Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?'" [Acts 5:7,8]

The first hint about Sapphira's attitude concerning this deception was that she waited three hours to come to join the church. What took her three hours? Perhaps she had chores to do, or shopping with her newly acquired money, or she just wanted to dress up for the honors she was sure would be hers because of their offering. Perhaps she wondered what was keeping her husband so long. Perhaps she thought honor had been poured upon Ananias and wanted to have a part of that too.

Secondly, Peter gave her a chance to honestly speak her version of this decision. He probably pointed to the very sack which her husband had laid before Peter. She could have quietly told the truth. But instead, Sapphira verified her husband's deception.

So, Peter challenged her veracity also. "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also. At that moment she fell down at his feet and died..." [Acts 5:9,10a]

The reaction of this incident was strongly felt among the believers. Peter confronted Ananias that his deception was harmful to all of them. "You have not lied just to human beings but to God." [Acts 5:4b] To Sapphira he charged, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord?" [Acts 5:9a] This instructed the new believers coming in daily that they must listen to the disciples, and that this movement was not just a gathering of like-minded people, but a consecrated congregation led by the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ.

All believers had received the same Spirit and were guided by Him, taught by Him and protected by Him. This was amazing to the people who had grown up their whole lives, only hearing that God's Spirit would come upon special people like prophets or kings for special work God wanted them to do. But now, every day Christians could experience the Spirit of the Lord.

Verse 11 stated that "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events." [Acts 5:11] Jesus Christ was truly in their midst, through His Spirit. The Lord would not tolerate pretenders or liars, because He wanted his church to grow in strength and reliance on Him.

This teaching about giving was not new. The Jewish members of the church would know God's desire for unadulterated worship. In Psalms 51 the psalmist exclaimed: "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise." [Psalm 51:16,17]

The purifying work that the Holy Spirit oversaw still works in our hearts today. Perhaps the caution they all felt at the death of Ananias and Sapphira caused the rest of the church to examine their giving. But most of all, it caused believers to examine their hearts before God concerning their giving, as it does today.

It is never stated whether Ananias or Sapphira were true believers, or not. They sinned by putting their reputations above their dedication to the Lord. We may someday see them among the saints in heaven. Their story would be "saved by grace,"

just as ours would be. But their bad choice acted to purify the church. That was exactly what God wanted for this brand-new congregation.

This instance was recounted by the people in Jerusalem and spread through Judea. "The Apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number." [Acts 5:12,13]

The Holy Spirit made Himself evident through signs and wonders, through the teaching of the apostles, through the respectful reputation of the church, and through the addition of new believers. The people of Jerusalem knew these people followed the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. But this was not a group of people still grieving their crucified leader, they demonstrated a power that was inexplicable except that it came from God.

Some of those demonstrated signs came as healings. "As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed." [Acts 5:15,16]

Jesus had authenticated His divinity by healing many people. Now, through His Holy Spirit, He authenticated His chosen disciples by giving healing to many just by the passing of Peter's shadow as he walked by. Jesus reassured His disciples, that, "they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." [John 14:12b]

Christ's Holy Spirit now indwelt each believer. So, wherever the disciples went, Christ demonstrated His presence within them through these signs and wonders – healing sick and disabled people, freeing demon possessed people from Satan's control, and remarkably, "all of them were healed." (v.16)

What an impact this must have made on Jerusalem and the surrounding areas! So many who had been ill or lame or mute were now healed! So many who had been "tormented" by demonic possession were released to sanity! No wonder that the presence of the church came to the attention of the religious leaders.

Verse 17 reveals that the reaction of the high priest and his associates was that they "were filled with jealousy." The same emotion that stirred them up to arrest and kill Jesus, was also filling their hearts about the reputation of the apostles. So, "they arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail." [Acts 5:18] Notice that all of the apostles were arrested, not just Peter and John as had been tried in chapter 4.

During the night the religious leaders probably envisioned their argument and hopeful intimidation of these apostles the next day, after a night in jail to soften them up. They were, after all, simple, uneducated men. The educated priests could easily put them in their place. However, God had another scenario in mind for them all.

"But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. 'Go, stand in the temple courts,' he said, 'and tell the people all about this new life.'" [Acts 5:19,20] In obedience, the apostles got up at day break, after sleeping soundly at home, to begin teaching again in the temple courts to whomever would listen.

Full of their own agenda, the high priest and his associates came together the next morning. They sent out runners to gather together all of the leaders of Israel: the Sanhedrin which included Sadducees and Pharisees and added the "full assembly of the elders of Israel." [Acts 5:21] The plan was to end this problem once and for all.

On the last night that Jesus met with His disciples before His crucifixion, He warned them that they would be hated, because He was hated. But He also encouraged them. "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom my Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." [John 14:26,27] It was this peace from the Holy Spirit that filled their hearts to help the apostles walk back into the very place from which they had been arrested the evening before.

Unknowingly, the priests and elders had a longer wait than expected, when soldiers were sent to fetch the apostles from the jail for their "trial." The men who went to get them, reported back. "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." [Acts 5:23]

How embarrassing! The religious leaders were waiting together for a dramatic confrontation with the followers of Jesus. Their intent was to intimidate them into silence – but their victims were not available! Verse 24 explains, "On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss, wondering what this might lead to." [Acts 5:24]

The chief priests thought they were dealing with simple, easily intimidated common folk. But these apostles, although they came from simple backgrounds, were filled with uncommon power and confidence from the Holy Spirit. They were not hiding, having somehow escaped from jail.

They were standing back in the temple courts boldly teaching the people as they had before. This should have been a sign to the leaders that this encounter was not

going to go as they expected. Nevertheless, the captain of the temple guard marched his officers over to the temple courts to arrest the apostles, again.

But this time they were hesitant. "They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them." [Acts 5:26] The officers must obey their orders. But they could tell that the people, many of whom had loved ones healed by these disciples, honored and loved these men. They had to use diplomacy during this arrest of the apostles. Again all 12 were arrested, not just Peter and John as their leaders.

Perhaps, after the believers themselves, these officers were the second to understand that the Holy Spirit was involved in this incident. These apostles were not rabble-rousers or instigators of a riot. They were not blasphemers or sacrilegious defilers of the temple. The apostles quietly left with them and caused no disturbance as they were brought in to stand before the Sanhedrin.

The high priest was first to question them. "'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,' he said. 'Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.'" [Acts 5:28] The charges were stated: the disciples taught when commanded not to do so; and in their teaching, the religious leaders were made to look guilty of killing the Lord Jesus, which was true.

Boldly, Peter with the other apostles stated their innocence. "We must obey God rather than human beings. The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." [Acts 5:29-32]

The apostles were innocent of any wrongdoing because they were being obedient to God, giving their eye-witness testimony to Israel according to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Even the religious leaders and elders should be able to recognize that obedience to God was of higher priority than obedience to men.

Those who saw the confidence and rationality of the apostles must have taken pause. These were not the country buffoons they expected. Their claim of obedience to God's command must be taken seriously.

However, those who hated Jesus, continued to hate His disciples. "When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death." [Acts 5:33] There seemed to be no rationality. There was no reasonable examination of the evidence. There was only a deep hate, just like when this body had performed the "trial" of Jesus, some two months before.

But God held one reasonable voice among the Sanhedrin. His name was Gamaliel. He was a Pharisee, a rabbi, who was respected among the leaders and honored by the people. One of his disciples was a young man who will be introduced in future chapters as Saul.

This wise rabbi had the apostles taken out of the room so that deliberation could be conducted about their charges. Gamaliel spoke to calm the infuriated leaders. "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men." [Acts 5:35] Gamaliel asked the chief priests to think this through, rather than acting impulsively in their anger.

He reminded Israel's leaders that there had been men who tried to rise up crowds in agitation and revolt. He named a man called Theudas, "who claimed to be somebody" and gathered a crowd of about 400 men to follow him. Secondly, he named Judas the Galilean who led people in a revolt. Both men were killed and their followers were scattered.

Gamaliel believed that the same end would probably come to the followers of Jesus, since He had been killed already. But the Holy Spirit inspired this rabbi to speak prophetically. "Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." [Acts 5:38,39]

The Holy Spirit moved this man to see beyond the raging emotions of the high priests. Gamaliel used a higher view to actually consider that God was indeed in control of these men and what they taught. In his logical consideration, he knew God would bring this sect to nothing if it was actually heretical.

However, if these men were actually obeying God, rather than men, the religious leaders would not be able to stop them. Any who attempted to stop their preaching would actually be fighting against God Himself! They could never be successful fighting against the Lord God.

"His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go." [Acts 5:40] Even with Gamaliel's warning about fighting against God, the leaders felt they had to regain dominance over the apostles. To do that they had them flogged and again warned them to stop teaching about Jesus.

Did their beatings intimidate the apostles? No. "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." [Acts 5:41] It was disgraceful to be arrested and put in jail. It was disgraceful to be flogged. But each of the disciples remembered that Jesus said this would happen,

when they bore Jesus' Name as His witnesses. So, rather than being intimidated, the disciples were rejoicing in their suffering.

By walking in obedience to all Jesus taught them, the apostles must take a chance that this persecution might even happen again. But even such a possibility could not stop their ministry. "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah." [Acts 5:42]

The lessons we learn from the apostles' experience are several. First, the Holy Spirit moves our hearts to see the needs of others. When He does so, He does not share glory with anyone. The generosity He stirs in each believer is meant to meet the needs of others and to bring glory to God through the church.

The Lord God Almighty does not share glory with even generous givers but instead promises His blessings to cheerful giver. The miracles and healings done through the apostles led to belief in God, not to adulation for Peter or any of the disciples. They were respected by believers and hunted by unbelievers. But all praise went to God for all He had done.

Second, when their notoriety brought them to the attention of the religious rulers, the apostles were unafraid because they knew that this too was part of God's plan. Jesus had warned them of this hatred. The religious rulers did come to arrest and later beat them because they were proclaiming the Name of Jesus. But the Holy Spirit was with them even in jail, so their reaction was to rejoice rather than to fear.

Finally, the Holy Spirit was present in the apostles' release and in their flogging. While the religious leaders intended to intimidate and punish the apostles, the Holy Spirit reminded them of Jesus' nearness and teachings. He warned them of the evil that would come on them as they witnessed in His Name.

The result was that this horrible beating only strengthened their resolve to continue to preach the name of Jesus! It demonstrated that they were obviously obeying Jesus' commands and wouldn't turn back now.

Their response to the high priests, "We must obey God rather than men," [Acts 5:29] became their battle cry. Let it be the same for each of us. May we take their example as our flag of courage. Let us also bring praise to God for any suffering we face because we keep teaching the Name of Jesus to everyone we encounter. Because we must also obey God rather than men.