

Acts Chapter 5

Welcome back to our Monday Night Bible Study. It is a privilege to share God's Word with you as we study Acts Chapter 5. Tonight, we will begin with a section that should cause us all to pause and take stock of our lives before the Lord.

This may not be the case for you, but, to me, certain passages in Scripture – especially at first glance – seem perplexing and difficult. This was true when I read of the suffering of Job. This was true when I read of Uzzah being struck down for touching the ark of God (2 Samuel 6:1-23). This was true when I read of David's and Bathsheba's infant son's death (2 Samuel 12:1 – 13:23). Sometimes the accounts we read in Scripture are simply quite difficult.

Sometimes *life* is quite difficult. The great revivalist of the Second Great Awakening here in America, Charles Finney, lost his wife to a terminal sickness, and he said that for a time he could not even recollect “communion and divine assurance,” and that he even gave up hope.

The theologian, John Stott, once said, “The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith, and has been in every generation. Its distribution and degree *appear to be*

entirely random and therefore unfair. Sensitive spirits ask if it can possibly be reconciled with God's justice and love" (emphasis mine).

Job, who suffered more than perhaps any person ever has other than Jesus Christ, once said, "I cannot relax or be calm; I have no rest, for turmoil has come" (Job 3:26).

In time, however, Job would say after hearing from the LORD, "You asked, 'Who is this who conceals my counsel with ignorance?' Surely I spoke about things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:3).

In time, the grieving Charles Finney also came to such a conclusion after hearing from the Lord, noting he then *truly* understood the passage, "My grace is sufficient for thee." He then glorified the God who delivered him from his bonds of grief, crying, "Wonderful! Wonderful! Wonderful!" in praise of His Savior.

As we begin tonight, we do so with another difficult – and even seemingly harsh – account in Scripture and in the lives of a couple in the Early Church.

Let's pray and dive right into God's Word.

Acts 5:1-11

Lying to the Holy Spirit

5 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. ² However, he kept back part of the proceeds with his wife's knowledge, and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.

³ "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ Wasn't it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn't it at your disposal? Why is it that you planned this thing in your heart? You have not lied to people but to God." ⁵ When he heard these words, Ananias dropped dead, and a great fear came on all who heard. ⁶ The young men got up, wrapped his body, carried him out, and buried him.

⁷ About three hours later, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ "Tell me," Peter asked her, "did you sell the land for this price?"

"Yes," she said, "for that price."

⁹ Then Peter said to her, "Why did you agree 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."

¹⁰ Instantly she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men came in, they found her dead, carried her out, and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ Then great fear came on the whole church and on all who heard these things.

What a strange account! We see in our initial passage that a husband and wife conspired together to sell a plot of land but to only give part of the proceeds to God, which would have apparently been just fine if they had been *honest* about how much they were offering. This event, of course, contrasts greatly with Barnabas and others who gave willingly.

There are further contrasts here to be made: The Church was under a tremendous anointing of the Holy Spirit, as we remember from the last chapter, and healing, miracles, and fulfilled prayers were taking place. There was unity in the Church. Needs were met. Care was had. Great grace was upon all of them. The Apostles were sharing their testimony regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Then the enemy attacked the Lord's Church, using the hapless Ananias and Sapphira to do Satan's work. Did Ananias and Sapphira sin? Yes, they greatly sinned. But should we be surprised that the enemy attacked the Church? Of course not. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens" (Ephesians 6:12).

Ananias and Sapphira did not give their all to Christ, and in failing to do so, then followed the *enemy's* plans for the Church. This couple grieved God, much as the Old Testament Israelites before them: “But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit” (Isaiah 63:10).

Additionally, just as Achan hid “some of what was set apart” which resulted in Israel’s defeat by the men of AI and, ultimately, in Achan’s and his family’s deaths in the Israelites’ march through the Promised Land, this New Testament couple lied to the Apostles about what they were giving to God, holding back part of their commitment and reaping the same result: death.

As the LORD said through Jeremiah. “Your own evil will discipline you; your own apostasies will reprimand you. Recognize how evil and bitter it is for you to abandon the LORD your God and to have no fear of me. This is the declaration of the Lord God of Armies” (Jeremiah 2:19).

Tonight, perhaps this punishment of Ananias and Sapphira seems harsh to us. Perhaps we remember times when *we* have committed to doing something for the Lord and have failed to do so, causing great fear in our lives. Well, good – because we *should* respect God enough not to commit to things we are not willing to carry out.

That said, let’s look at a few additional lessons from this passage:

- 1) This passage is not simply about *Peter's* response to Ananias and Sapphira's sin – it is far more about respect for and obedience to *the Person of the Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit here is identified here *as* God, which does extraordinarily more than just cementing Trinitarian doctrine: it also establishes, again, the Holy Spirit's powerful *work* in the Early Church. So what do we know from about the Spirit? Well, we know from the Book of Acts alone that He can be lied to (5:1), that He can be tested (5:9), that He bears witness (5:32), that He is can be resisted (7:51), that He gives orders (8:29; 10:19; 13:2), that He refuses permission (16:7), and that He speaks.
- 2) Our relationship with the Holy Spirit matters! He alone equips us for service, and He sustains us in our service. It is by God's power that we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). We *must know* the Person of the Spirit to be of any earthly good to Jesus Christ! For the pastor, as said Finney, "Without the direct teaching of the Holy Spirit, a man will never make much progress in preaching the Gospel.
- 3) This passage says a lot about how Christians are to give. We are to give *willingly*, as we see in Exodus 35:5, 1 Chronicles 29:9, Proverbs 11:24-25, Philippians 4:18-19, and 2 Corinthians 9:7: "Each person should do as he has decided in his heart – not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver."

This may not be the most popular topic for a pastor to preach, but it is certainly a command that we, as Christians, are to give lovingly and cheerfully to God! We may give *through* the local Church, but we are giving *to* God.

- 4) This passage reminds us of God's right to judge. We may not always understand His judgment, but God is holy, He expects our all, and He has the *right* to expect our all. We are bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)! We *may* not experience immediate judgment like Ananias and Sapphira when we sin, but we all should expect our works to be judged by God (2 Corinthians 5:10).

So, what do we do? We "Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the schemes of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11). We depend on God's strength to help us overcome the enemy (Ephesians 6:10; Philippians 4:13). "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). Jesus said to abide in Him (John 15:5) and in the power of the Spirit (John 16:13). [For] "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37). We do not overcome the enemy on our own – we overcome the enemy through the power of the Holy Spirit!

Acts 5:12-16

Apostolic Signs and Wonders

¹² Many signs and wonders were being done among the people through the hands of the apostles. They were all together in Solomon's Colonnade.¹³ No one else dared to join them, but the people spoke well of them.¹⁴ Believers were added to the Lord in increasing numbers—multitudes of both men and women. ¹⁵ As a result, they would carry the sick out into the streets and lay them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ In addition, a multitude came together from the towns surrounding Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

So, what happened after the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira? Signs and wonders and a powerful move of God took place! The sin was purged, the Spirit reigned, and the Church continued to grow in unity and in numbers.

Looking back at this passage, there may *seem* to be a contradiction between Verse 13, which says, “no one dared to join them,” and Verse 14, which says that believers were added “in increasing numbers;” however, it is more likely that there were many lost people *interested* in the signs, wonders, and message of through the Apostles but who feared the miraculous judgment of Ananias and Sapphira and thus did not dare join the Church, yet there were also many others who were convinced of

the Gospel and *did* dare to join the Church through Christ. *Both* statements are true.

In any case, God was greatly using the Apostles. People were being healed and delivered by Jesus through His servants, apparently Peter in particular. We should note, though, that it was neither Peter nor the Apostles who *accomplished* these miracles, although they were conduits of a sort, but rather it was the Holy Spirit of God moving in power in the name of Jesus and in honor of the Father (2 Corinthians 13:13).

Acts 5:17-21

In and out of Prison

¹⁷ Then the high priest rose up. He and all who were with him, who belonged to the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ So they arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail during the night, brought them out, and said, ²⁰ “Go and stand in the temple, and tell the people all about this life.” ²¹ Hearing this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

This is, again, another sign that God’s sovereign plans will take place, in that, not only did the wayward couple’s sin *not* stop this Spirit-empowered move of God, but also that the religious leaders were powerless to even keep the Apostles in jail!

Now, the Apostles were in jail to begin with because of the extreme jealousy of the Sadducees: The Bible says the Sadducees were “filled with jealousy” so they *arrested* the Apostles, regardless of their previous fear to openly do so. The Sadducees were “indignant” that the Apostles were witnessing about the resurrection of Christ given that they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, and they were also quite apparently envious regarding the *number* of people who were listening to and accepting the Apostles’ teaching.

Just as the Old Testament Israelites rebelled against God and refused to soften their hearts towards Him prior to their exile to Babylon, *these* Israelite Sadducees likewise hardened their hearts towards the very move, power, and works of God through the Apostles’ testimony of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. So, they arrested the Apostles, apparently thinking this would stop them.

And, wow, were they in for a surprise after jailing the Apostles! The Sadducees did not believe in angels – and guess who God used to open the doors of the jail during the night? That’s right, one of God’s angels! Oh, the irony is too great for words!

Note the command of the angel to the Apostles: “Go, stand in the Temple, and teach people about the life [in Christ].”

You know, during Jesus’s earthly ministry, He often taught in the Temple: it is no surprise, then, that the Apostles were commanded to teach there too. It is also not surprising what (Who) they were to teach. As Paul said, we must teach about Jesus!

As John Mark Comer said: “I stand (or really, walk) with a vast multitude of others around the world and down through history who have come to believe: There simply is no better way, truth, or life to be found than that of Jesus.” These Apostles, once timid and afraid, were now Spirit-empowered, soul winners – and right back to the Temple they went as instructed by the angel of God. When Jesus first said, “Come, follow me,” the Apostles of Jesus had no idea what they were getting into. Now, they were *obedient* in their followership of Jesus Christ, and God used them greatly.

Acts 5:22-32

The Apostles on Trial Again

When the high priest and those who were with him arrived, they convened the Sanhedrin—the full council of the Israelites—and sent orders to the jail to have them brought. ²² But when the servants^[a] got there, they did not find them in the jail; so they returned and reported, ²³ “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing in front of the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one

inside.”²⁴ As^[b] the captain of the temple police and the chief priests heard these things, they were baffled about them, wondering what would come of this.

²⁵ Someone came and reported to them, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple and teaching the people.”²⁶ Then the commander went with the servants and brought them in without force, because they were afraid the people might stone them.²⁷ After they brought them in, they had them stand before the Sanhedrin, and the high priest asked,²⁸ “Didn’t we strictly order you not to teach in this name? Look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

²⁹ Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than people.”³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had murdered by hanging him on a tree.³¹ God exalted this man to his right hand as ruler and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

We know, as Christians, that we are to be humbly submissive to those God has placed in spiritual authority above us. Remember that David lived in honor of Saul regardless of Saul’s horrible behavior, even choosing to obey God rather than to take Saul’s life on two occasions.

Here in Acts 5, we should immediately note that Peter and the Apostles, as faithful Jews under the High Priest's office, would not *normally* have disobeyed the direct commands. There are times, however, when God tells people to disobey someone in authority. We should be *very* careful to discern such *rare* occasions. As Mark Rutland so ably says, "Be slow to speak for God. If you have a word from God, then by all means speak it. Be careful not to respond out of your emotions. Wait for a firm answer from God." The Apostles were not being disrespectful in their answers to the Sanhedrin, nor were they being disrespectful to the High Priest.

The High Priest was simply wrong:

- First, he and the Sanhedrin did not recognize the *power* of God and *His* miraculous deliverance of the Apostles. They were baffled. Jesus, quoting Isaiah, said of such people: "For this people's heart has grown callous; their ears are hard of hearing and they have shut their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts and turn back – and I would heal them" (Matthew 13:15; Isaiah 6:9-10). This was one of the reasons that Jesus spoke in parables. Parables revealed truth to those willing to hear and believe, but they concealed truth from those who willingly rejected such truth because of their hardened hearts.

- Second, he said that *the Apostles* were the ones determined to make the Sanhedrin guilty regarding the blood of Jesus. This is ridiculous, of course: the religious leaders themselves had said at the trial of Jesus, “All the people answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children’” (Matthew 27:25).
- Additionally, we have *all* sinned and we are *all* guilty of the blood of Christ. “As it is written, “There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away; all have become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one...For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:10-13, 23; Psalm 14:1-3, 53:1-3; Ecclesiastes 7:20). “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death spread to all people, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

Here, we see that Peter and the Apostles responded truthfully and accordingly to the Sanhedrin’s demands:

- “We must obey God rather than people” (which obviously referenced the Sanhedrin and the High Priest).
- God the Father, the God of Israel, “raised up Jesus.” (Expound).
- You murdered Jesus by having Him hung on a tree (a euphemism for the crucifixion).
- Jesus is both the Ruler and Savior.

- For the repentant there is forgiveness through Jesus.
- We are witnesses of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (“these things”).
- “So is the Holy Spirit who is given to those who obey him.”

This is the truth of the Gospel.

During World War II, Bonhoeffer noted the response of the Apostles in Acts 5, and he then apparently correlated the stand the Apostles took with those in the Church who resisted the Hitler Youth movement. This vital confession of faith in Acts 5 by the Apostles was also later noted in *other* important Christian confessions, including the Apostles’ Creed.

And in our final passage tonight, we get to see the Sanhedrin’s sad response to the Apostles, and by extension, to the call of Christ.

Acts 5:33-42

Gamaliel’s Advice

³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was respected by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered the men^[c] to be taken outside for a little while. ³⁵ He said to them, “Men of Israel, be careful about what you’re about to do to these men. ³⁶ Some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of

about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, and all his followers were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After this man, Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and attracted a following. He also perished, and all his followers were scattered. ³⁸ So in the present case, I tell you, stay away from these men and leave them alone. For if this plan or this work is of human origin, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even be found fighting against God.” They were persuaded by him. ⁴⁰ After they called in the apostles and had them flogged, they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them. ⁴¹ Then they went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be treated shamefully on behalf of the Name.^[d] ⁴² Every day in the temple, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

I would genuinely love to tell you that Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin repented of their sin, acknowledged their error, and committed themselves to Jesus Christ. Sadly, they did the opposite. They were so enraged at the Apostle’s Gospel Message and the open rebellion (in their minds) to the Council’s instructions that they immediately wanted to take the Apostles out and kill them. Keep in mind that they were afraid of the people, but the men of the Sanhedrin became *so* enraged that they even, at least temporarily, forgot their fear.

Gamaliel, a respected teacher of the Law and the personal instructor of Saul (later Paul), convinced the Sanhedrin to take a cooler-headed approach. Perhaps Gamaliel was simply this level-headed. Perhaps he remembered Solomon's words: "The heart of a wise person instructs his mouth; it adds learning [some versions say persuasiveness] to his speech (Proverbs 16:23). Perhaps it was the work of the Spirit reaching Gamaliel's heart due to the sovereign plans of God. It seems likely that all these things were true – Gamaliel convinced his fellow leaders to forgo their deadly intentions by reminding them of two things:

- 1) Others had come before them with various movements which eventually failed.
- 2) It would be impossible to overcome the Christian movement if it was of God. This followed the general Jewish thinking that if God ordains something, it will surely come to pass.

Sadly, the men of the Sanhedrin did not turn to Jesus. Instead, they further threatened the Apostles about speaking in Jesus's name and had them flogged (forty stripes, minus one, was the general rule for flogging).

Conversely, the Apostles left the Sanhedrin in pain I am sure, but in full rejoicing over the fact that they had been tortured due to the Name of Jesus: it was an *honor* to them to be counted worthy of such a call. What an amazing attitude and it is one *we* should employ. Everything God calls

us to is worthy of the Name. He is worthy of it all. These Spirit-filled and -empowered men loved their Savior above all else.

They continued to meet in homes, they continued meeting at the Temple, they continued their teaching, and they boldly proclaimed the Good News that Jesus is the Messiah!

We simply cannot overlook the evidence that the Holy Spirit accomplished divine work in the Apostles and that He can accomplish divine work in us. As Ron Kenoly once sang, “Anointing, fall on me. Let the power of the Holy Ghost fall on me. Anointing fall on me.” Today, we hear similar words from Brandon Lake and Maverick City Music, “Fire and wind, come and do it again. Open up the gates, let Heaven on in. Come rest on us. Come rest on us,” and then, “Spirit, when you move You make my heart pound. When You fill the room You’re here and I know you are moving.”

How is it with your spirit tonight, my friends? When we are filled – when we are baptized – in the Spirit, we are convicted, we are open to God’s Word, we are anointed to see and hear the eternal truth of God. The Spirit loves us, moves us, woos us, warns us, and even removes temptations from us. As David Wilkerson said, [The Holy Spirit] oftentimes makes Christ so real to us, it drives from our hearts all desire to sin.

And one day, both we and the Israelites – our Spiritual heritage – will truly understand the words of the LORD through His servant Ezekiel, “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh.”

It is a privilege to study God’s Word with you. Let’s pray.

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