

Acts 5 - Signs & Wonders, Arrest & Freedom

Scripture:

Ananias and Sapphira

5 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." ⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

⁸ And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you^[a] sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." ⁹ But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

Many Signs and Wonders Done

¹² Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. ¹³ None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

The Apostles Arrested and Freed

¹⁷ But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy ¹⁸ they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ²⁰ “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” ²¹ And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.

²² But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, ²³ “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.” ²⁴ Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. ²⁵ And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.” ²⁶ Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.” ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. ³⁴ But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. ³⁵ And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” So they took his advice, ⁴⁰ and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the

name.⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

Last week we ended with Barnabas, whose name means “son of encouragement” has sold a piece of property and given the proceeds to the church for those in need.

Barnabas gave because his heart was in the right place. He placed others above his own comfort and security.

But not everyone had the same motives.

Acts 5:1-6

5 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? 4 While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." 5 When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. 6 The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

Ananias and Sapphira were different than the other Christians described in Acts 4. They did not turn all of the proceeds from the sale of their property at the feet of the disciples. They held some back for themselves.

When confronted, Ananias lies. Now why did he do this?

- He may have had an issue with loving money, while wishing to look good to the other believers.
- He may have had an issue with being a habitual liar all his life.

Whatever the case, his sin reminds us that we need to speak the truth diligently and without fail.

Peter affirms that Ananias had every right to keep the money. The problem is not that they wanted to keep some of it, but that they lied about how much of the total they gave to the church.

Peter tells Ananias that he has not lied to men, but to God

Because of his lie, Ananias dies on the spot.

Acts 5:7-11

7 After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." 9 But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10 Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

Three hours later, Sapphira comes without knowing what had happened to her husband.

She too lies and Peter asks her why she and her husband decided to test the Spirit of the Lord?

The result of this judgment is that great fear came over the whole church.

This story reminds us that God is infinitely holy and must be worshiped as holy.

Too often today we have no sense of the holiness of God. Today we have lost our sense of God's limitless perfection and moral purity.

And in kind, we have lost our sense of the gravity of our sin. Some may look at what Ananias and Sapphira did and think it was really no big deal, but our sin is not just some minor mistake. Every sin is an act of cosmic treason and is an attempt to dethrone God from His sovereign authority.

Sin is an assault on God's character, and the amazing thing is not that God killed Ananias and Sapphira for lying, but that He doesn't execute justice on all of us, but instead sent His Son to pay the price for our sins.

So we must respond to God's holiness in a way the early church did. We must fear God.

Because of God's grace found in Jesus Christ, our relationship with God is no longer as a guilty offender, but as a forgiven child.

We should stand in awe and wonder at God's holiness. We should fear His power and His might. We should fear Him as our creator who holds our every breath in His hands.

The fear we are to have of God does not cause us to be timid and uncertain, but lead to reverence and wonder.

God did not and will not allow lying and hypocrisy to grow in the church.

Many Signs and Wonders

Acts 5:12-16

Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. 13 None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. 14 And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, 15 so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. 16 The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

We find ourselves again in a familiar place, Solomon's Portico near the Beautiful Gate on the temple mount. This is the same place that Peter and John encountered the man who was lame from birth and where they encountered the priest and the captain of the temple.

This space will play a pivotal role in this early church. You might say that this spot in the temple was ground zero for the public ministry among the early Christians. In Acts 3, Peter preached the Gospel in the Portico and now signs and wonders are taking place there.

But there is an interesting dynamic taking place here also.

Publicity apparently had gotten out about the arrest of Peter and John, and the news of Ananias and Sapphira, had scared many people away from associating with the apostles. The apostles were gathering together at the temple, but many people were scared to be around them. But even with this fear, the apostles were held at high esteem.

Despite the tension, the church continued to grow. The apostles teaching of the Gospel is authenticated by the signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit that are being done amongst the sick and demon possessed.

Nothing, not even human fear, can keep the Gospel from effectively challenging sinners and leading them from sin to salvation.

We are reminded here that it is the Lord who builds the church. The church is not built on marketing strategies, advertising, or feelgood programs. The church is built on the power of God's word and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Persecution, fear, and negative reports could not keep the Holy Spirit from saving sinners and bringing them to Jesus. We should never seek alternative means to take the place of sharing the Gospel to grow the church. Advertising and marketing may enhance our reach, but never replace our message.

Arrested and Freed

Acts 5:17-21

17 But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy 18 they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, 20 “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” 21 And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

While many amazing things were occurring in the early church, opposition was always in the wings.

The high priest and the Sadducees are jealous of the popularity of the apostles and have them arrested.

Remember the Sadducees are the liberal arm of Judaism and only accepted the Torah as Scripture, did not believe in angels or demons, supernatural gifts (so you can see why they were irritated by the healings), the resurrection, eternal life, heaven, or hell. It is amazing that we know more about what they were against than what they are for.

The Sadducees were also politically corrupt and collaborated with Rome. The large gathering of people seeking out the apostles threatened their political commitments and diverted attention that they thought they should be receiving.

The irony of this is that the Lord sends the very being that the Sadducees don't believe in to free the apostles from prison.

This angel gives the apostles very specific and astounding instructions

- The apostles are not to go and hide until the heat from the leaders calms down, but they are to go to the temple.
- They are to speak the words of this life to the people.
 - The Scriptures make clear that Jesus is “this life.” Jesus said he was the life. So the apostles are to go and preach life, which is Jesus Christ.

The apostles are in jail for preaching the Gospel, and now they are instructed to go and do the same again.

We often value our safety and security more than the Gospel and the Great Commission. But God is providing for the apostles in the midst of their faithfulness, and He will do the same for us.

So the apostles go to the temple courts at daybreak.

Acts 5:21-26

Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. 22 But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, 23 “We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.” 24 Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would come to. 25 And someone came and told them, “Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.” 26 Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

It was early in the day, so word of the apostles release from prison had not reach the council. Once the council is convened they sent for the apostles, but the guard returns and says that the apostles are no longer in jail.

The condition of the cell was all as it should have been; the only problem was that there were no apostles there. This was truly bad news for the guards. Losing a prisoner meant your life would be forfeit. So in fear and embarrassment, the officers had to come back to the council and report the absence of the apostles.

Puzzlement and anxiety rippled through the council. Finally, someone reports that the apostles are in the temple preaching.

The irony is thick in this whole episode.

- An angel, that the Sadducees don't believe exists, frees the apostles from jail.
- The political class, who like to be known for the wisdom and knowledge, were clueless about what had happened to the apostles.
- The leaders are so afraid of the people stoning them if they injure the apostles in any way.

These ironies are proof of the hand of God at work. God can turn the greatest powers of this world into bumbling fools who fear the very people they rule. God's plans cannot be stopped and the advance of the kingdom cannot be thwarted; and so His people must not be silenced.

The Trial

Acts 5:21-32

27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, 28 saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." 29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. 30 The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

The apostles are brought to the council and accused of spreading their teaching throughout all of Jerusalem, so their message was not confined to the just the temple, and bringing the blood of Jesus on their hands.

The apostles response is one of the most important statements in the New Testament: "We must obey God rather than men."

This statement is important to our Christian life, and helps us to understand our relationship with the government within a biblical worldview.

The bible teaches us that the government has a rightful authority given it by God. So, all humans, especially Christians, are to submit to the authority of the government. But governments themselves are not God- so they must not overreach their authority and make demands that go beyond the authority given them by God.

A government that forbids the worship of the one true and living God is one which, at that point, does not deserve and cannot receive our submission.

Acts 5:33

33 When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. 34 But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. 35 And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. 36 For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37 After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. 38 So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might

even be found opposing God!” So they took his advice, 40 and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

The council want to kill the apostles, but a cooler head, a man by the name of Gamaliel, prevails and convinces the council that if the apostles were of God then there was nothing the council could do to stop them. This is probably the same Gamaliel who will instruct Saul before he became Paul.

So the apostles are let go, but not before they are beaten and told again not to preach in the name of Jesus. But they do not cease and continue to defy the religious leaders.

Takeaways

- As believers we must be truthful because concealed sin will be judged.
- The true church will not be built by advertising and marketing campaigns, but only on the truth of the Gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Even when we are faithful, there will be those who appose us. But this does not mean that God has abandoned us. We must remain faithful no matter what.
- When we trust in God’s sovereignty and genuinely desire to see the kingdom of God advance, we will not resent God’s trials in our lives, but learn to rejoice in them.

Let’s pray.

Application & Reflection

- What forms might compromise and hypocrisy take in your own life?
- How, as local church members, can we address compromise in each other's lives with both seriousness and graciousness?
- How is it both freeing and liberating to know that we are called simply to be faithful, leaving the results to God?
- Can you think of times in your life that looked desperate and hopeless, but through which you saw the sovereignty of God at work? How does this encourage you to remain faithful to him today?
- Are you prepared to suffer dishonor for Christ's name? Would you count it a privilege to do so? If not, what would it take for you to adopt this perspective?
- "We must obey God rather than men." How does this need to shape your own actions today? Is there anyone you know whom the Lord is prompting you gently to challenge with this exhortation?