

Study 7: Acts chapter 5

(Just when things were going so well...)

Introduction

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Body of the Study

What is going on with Ananias and Sapphira?

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira

What was the result of these events?

Who is working the miracles here?

The reaction of the Sanhedrin

Before the Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin response

The result of the events

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *How has God answered the apostles' prayer of 4:29?*
- *How does opposition to God's word result in opportunities to teach the gospel?*
- *How did the early church evangelise? What should we do to evangelise?*

Notes for study 7: Acts chapter 5

Introduction

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

We cannot be absolutely sure of the time, nor of the intervening period between chapters 4 and 5. However, the flow from the previous chapter, with the description of Barnabas and the flow into Ananias and Sapphira would suggest that it was about the same time as the events of chapter 4 - around June of 33 AD.

Content: *What are the major events?*

Discipline of Ananias and Sapphira, Further growth of the church, High Priest & Sadducees put apostles in prison and before Sanhedrin, Gamaliel's defence.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Ananias, Sapphira, Peter, the High Priest, Sadducees, Gamaliel.

Body of the Study

In the previous chapter, Barnabas sells his land and brings the money to the apostles. This leads right into the action of Ananias and Sapphira. It would seem that they were looking for the same adulation that Barnabas must have received, however they were not prepared to make the same sacrifice.

The first conflict faced by the early church was from without – persecution by the Sanhedrin. The second conflict now comes from within the church.

What is going on with Ananias and Sapphira?

The church in Jerusalem was in great need, due to the temporary visitation of people from all over the world who had extended their stay after becoming Christians. They needed money to buy food and live. They pooled their resources and shared everything that they had. Those who had land and possessions sold them and brought the money to the apostles (4:32-35).

Ananias and Sapphira had some land, which they sold, bringing the money to the apostles. However, they kept part of it for themselves. This was not a spur of the moment thing, because Sapphira was also fully aware of what was done. They had “...*agreed together to do it...*” (5:9).

It might be thought that the problem with Ananias and Sapphira was in not giving everything that they had to the Lord, but this was not the case. They did not have to sell the land (5:4), and even after selling it, they were fully free to keep the money for themselves. It was “...*within their own control...*” (5:4). They could well have kept part of the money, or even all of the money for themselves, and brought some to the apostles. But what they did was to *lie* about how much they had given – they had said that they sold the land, and here is *all of the money* – when in fact they had sold the land for more than that and kept *the difference* for themselves.

Peter had knowledge of what had happened. We don't know how Peter knew – he may have had knowledge from the man who bought the land, or more likely this was an example of the miraculous power of “discerning of spirits” (1 Cor 12:10). But he could have equally seen the advertisement in the estate agents window. But he knew.

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira

After making the contribution to the apostles, Peter asks Ananias “...*why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...*” (5:3 NKJV). He concludes the question with the comment “...*You have not lied to men but to God...*” (5:4 NKJV). Peter shows here very clearly and precisely the Deity of the Holy Spirit.

Ananias and Sapphira’s sin began when Satan had planted the idea in their heart (5:3). But it did not end there. Peter questions him “Why?” He must take accountability for the fruition of the idea. Resistance to the temptation by Ananias was fully possible, but he (and Sapphira) had allowed the temptation to take root and to grow. “...*When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death...*” (Jas 1:13-15 NIV).

In 5:4, the temptation had taken root, and now Ananias is asked why he had conceived this in his heart. He had submitted to the temptation of Satan, and sin when it is conceived brings forth death ... (Js 1:15) ... but not the example of physical death that we see in this chapter.

Ananias’ death was a direct miracle, without the intervention of the apostles. The literal translation of 5:5 is “...*His spirit left him...*” (Gk 1634 *ekpsucho* – *ek* = out; *psuche* = soul).

Whilst some have argued that he died from the shock of being found out, we need to remember that Peter knew what was going to happen when Sapphira arrived. There is really no answer but that of the direct intervention of God.

It was about 3 hours later when Sapphira “...*came in, not knowing what had happened...*” (5:7 NKJV) to Ananias. She was prepared to act out the deception that had been conceived with Ananias. Peter challenges her, and she too lies about how much the land had been sold for. She had the opportunity for repentance, but continued with the lie. Her fate lay with that of her husband. Her death, like that of Ananias was a direct act of God.

What was the result of these events?

Great fear came upon all the church, and also to those who heard about the events. We should not underestimate the power demonstrated by the event. We should also consider the alternatives:

- What if Ananias and Sapphira had gotten away with it?
- What would be the effect on the church, if right from the beginning, people found that they could get away with lying to God’s

Such an outcome would have been disastrous, and Ananias and Sapphira are held up as examples of just how seriously God deals with our behaviour.

The effect however, was the further growth of the church. The apostles (and probably the Christians) were held in high esteem by the Jewish people, although many of the people were afraid to join the Christians (probably fearing persecution from the Jewish leaders). However, this did not stop the apostles from converting people, since “...*believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women...*” (5:14 NKJV).

We can only guess at the number of the “*multitudes*”, but if it were to be several thousand, it would bring the number of disciples in Jerusalem at that time to perhaps 15,000. There is no doubt that the awe and esteem in which they were held was due to the powerful action with Ananias and Sapphira.

Who is working the miracles here?

Luke mentions that “...*through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people...*” (5:12 NKJV). Once again we see, that the apostles were the only ones (at this stage) who were working miracles. Apparently, the power had not yet been extended to others (or if it was, we are not told about it, and we have no basis for such a conclusion).

The reputation of the apostles developed rapidly, and news spread to the nearby cities. As they did with Jesus, people came from far and near to be healed by the apostles. This is strong evidence that the things that the apostles were doing and teaching was *not done in a corner*, but was prominent in the city so that everyone knew what was going on. Such was the reputation of Peter, that people even sought to have his shadow pass over them. This shows an interesting twist on how the miracles in the first century were performed.

Just as healing virtue had flowed from Jesus by touching in faith the edge of his cloak (cf. Mk 5:25-34), so even Peter's shadow was used by God to effect a cure (cf. 19:11-12). And whereas the healing of the crippled beggar had originally aroused the Sadducees' antagonism, now, Luke tells us, such miracles were being repeated numerous times in the apostles' ministry. Thus crowds from the outlying districts around Jerusalem thronged the apostles. No wonder the Sadducees' jealousy erupted anew! (NIVBC)

It should be noted however, that again in this case, the miracles came about by the apostles.

The reaction of the Sanhedrin

The Christians were continuing to meet in the Temple, “...and they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch...” (5:12 NKJV). This was one of the largest areas of the outer part of the Temple. Edersheim¹ calculates the size of the Temple courtyard at about 1,000 feet (300m) square. This makes Solomon's Porch around 300m long, and probably about 20 or 30m wide. It was a common place for the Christians to assemble (remember that they were all Jews at this time – no Gentiles had been converted yet). It had also been a common place where Jesus taught in the Temple (Jn 10:23).

The High Priest and the Sadducees attack the apostles. Peter and John (who probably appeared to be the leaders) had previously been given a warning, flogged and let go. This time, the attack again comes from the Sadducees. Unlike the Pharisees, they are not religiously, but rather politically motivated.

In this case, the whole 12 apostles (see vs 29) were arrested and “...put into the public jail...” (5:18 NIV). They must have wondered what fate lay before them, as they (at least Peter and John) had already been warned.

The politically motivated Sadducees would have had a difficult night, being torn between their allegiances to the Sanhedrin, and the high regard the people held for the apostles. Having already had one warning, the charge would normally lead to capital punishment. But with such popularity amongst the people, they are in a difficult position.

However, the apostles are released “...during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out...” (5:19 NIV). The angel instructed them to “...Go, stand in the temple courts...and tell the people the full message of this new life.” (5:20 NIV). Their release had been miraculous, as they had all escaped through the locked and guarded prison doors.

Once again, the Council (the Sanhedrin) comes together early in the morning led by the High Priest – as they could only meet by day. Alas, the apostles were not to be found in the prison!

This must have caused considerable concern to the officers who “...found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” (5:23 NIV). The High Priest and the Sanhedrin were perplexed about this, and “...they wondered what the outcome would be...” (5:24 NKJV). From the description of what follows, their question was more about where the apostles had gone. They were soon informed by someone who came and told them that “...the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people...” (5:25 NKJV).

¹ Edersheim, Alfred: “The Temple” Eerdmans Publishing Co, ISBN 0-8028-8133-5 p. 38
Study of Acts (Revised 2007) by Graeme Offer

The Captain of the Temple Guard took with him some officers, and peacefully arrested the apostles – because they feared the violence that the people (the Christians and some of the Jews) might bring against them if they arrested them forcefully.

There is (perhaps) implied here a difference in the way the apostles are handled on this occasion than they were on the night before. On the previous day, they were zealously pursued by the High Priest and the Sadducees in their arrest, with aggression in the attempt to stop their teaching.

Now, the Sadducees are initially concerned by their overnight restlessness, then pulled up in their tracks by finding the prison fast but the prisoners gone, and finally shocked by finding them teaching again back in the Temple. Rather than the zealous pursuit of the previous night, it is time for a more gentle approach, and we see the hand of God at work in the process which eventually leads to release rather than their death.

Before the Sanhedrin

Now the 12 apostles are standing where Jesus stood, and facing what He faced. Just a week or so ago, Peter and John had stood there. Eventually, Paul will stand there too (23:1). Unlike the “fishing expedition” inquiry that had been directed towards Peter & John, this time the questioning by the High Priest is explicit - “...*Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name?...*” (5:28 NKJV). And further: “...*you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine...*” and you “...*intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!...*” (5:28 NKJV).

There are two charges here:

- Disobedience to the injunction served on them by the Sanhedrin, and
- Attempting to show the Sanhedrin to be guilty of the murder of an innocent man,

Peter again takes the lead in the response. To the first charge, they plead guilty: “...*We ought to obey God rather than men...*” (5:29 NKJV).

On the second charge, Peter appeals to the fact of the resurrection of Jesus by God:

- Would God have raised Him up if he was a guilty man? (No!)
- If he was innocent, then what you did was wrong!
- God has put Him in the supreme position (at His right hand),
- Through Jesus, Israel has repentance and forgiveness of sin,
- We can give eyewitness account of these things,
- The Holy Spirit also attests to this (they had seen and heard the action of the Holy Spirit with the Pentecost events, speaking in tongues, and the miracles – not the least of which was the lame man!)

The Sanhedrin response

The anger of the Sanhedrin is raised, “...*When they heard this they were furious and took counsel to kill them...*” (5:33 NKJV).

However some common sense prevails, when the esteemed Gamaliel arises to address the Sanhedrin. He was regarded as one of the seven greatest teachers among the Rabbis, and it was under him that Saul (later to be called Paul) studied (22:3). The grandson of Hillel, he died in AD 52, 18 years before the destruction of Jerusalem.

The apostles are removed whilst the Sanhedrin consider the matter (just as Peter and John had been). It is unlikely that Luke heard the speech of Gamaliel himself, since Luke was a Gentile. More likely Luke received it from Paul, who may have himself been present, or had it reiterated to him at a later time by his great teacher. And of course, there were two disciples who were members of the Sanhedrin – Nicodemus (Jn 3:1) and Joseph of Arimathea (Mk 15:43; Jn 19:38).

Gamaliel refers to an uprising by “Theudas”. Josephus also mentions such a person², and such an uprising, but there is a significant difference in the timeframe (the one mentioned by Josephus occurred in AD 44 – about 10 years after the time of this meeting of the Sanhedrin), and the facts (Gamaliel mentions 400 followers, where Josephus mentions that he persuaded a “greater part of the people” to pack up their effects and follow him to the Jordan River). This can be accounted for as a different event by two people with the same name. Gamaliel also mentions “Judas of Galilee” who led a revolt at the time of the census under Quirinius. This occurred in 6 BC, and is also described by Josephus³.

The clear pleas from Gamaliel is to let history be the judge of these men, since if God is for it, then who can be against it “...*if this plan is from men it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it – lest you even be found to fight against God...*” (5:38-39 NKJV).

The apostles are now brought back in, are beaten, commanded not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then let go.

The result of the events

The apostles departed, and rejoiced “...*because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name...*” (5:41 NIV). Whilst this might have been regarded by some as a setback, they continued with their teaching, not only in the temple, but also in their houses “...*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 Christ...*” (5:42 NIV).

² Josephus, Antiq 20:5:1 (p. 418)

³ Josephus, Antiq 17:10:5 (p. 371)