

## Chapter 12: Testing the Spirit of the Lord

*Acts 5:1–11*

At the end of Acts 4, we might have expected Luke to conclude the whole history with, “And they all lived happily ever after.” That expectation, however, would misjudge Luke’s intentions and the nature of the church. Within the church in every age, God is at work, accomplishing great and powerful things through the testimony of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, within every age, there are also hypocrites whose true colors do not appear at first. In this story, we see how much hypocrites mimic genuine believers, and we also see how the Lord views hypocrisy. We also learn the important remedy to this problem in the church: *the fear of the Lord drives out hypocrisy*.

### Fearless Hypocrisy (Acts 5:1–2)

As we come to the story of Ananias and Sapphira, there are two general observations that help to guide our understanding. First, we can acknowledge that we all feel the shock of this passage, a reaction that Polhill expresses in honest terms: “Perhaps no passage in Acts raises more serious difficulties for Christian readers. The judgment on these two seems so harsh, so nonredemptive, so out of keeping with the gospel.”<sup>1</sup> This observation is honest as a starting point; however, as Polhill quickly acknowledges, the solution to this initial reaction can only come by careful study of the passage, in order that we might “examine what it seems to say and what it does not say.”<sup>2</sup>

Second, several commentators draw a parallel between this passage and the Old Testament story of Achan, especially since the verb in v. 2 for how Ananias “kept back” some of the proceeds of the sale of his property is a rare verb that notoriously appears also in Joshua 7:1 to describe Achan’s sin of *keeping back* some of the spoil that had been dedicated to the Lord.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, there are differences between these two passages.<sup>4</sup> Schnabel probably accounts for the similarities and differences best by acknowledging that there may be something of a type-scene in this account:

More plausible are interpretations in terms of salvation history, where perfect or promising beginnings are followed by accounts of sin. After the perfect harmony of Eden, Adam and

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<sup>1</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 155.

<sup>2</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 156.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 110. See also Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 193; Polhill, *Acts*, 156.

<sup>4</sup> “This is not an ‘exact parallel’ of Josh. 7, as four differences show...: (1) Joshua has not miracle. (2) Here a lie is told to Peter; not a disclosure as with Achan. (3) The community does not suffer any loss. (4) There is no stoning; God acts directly. This kind of instant judgment is unique in the NT, although it is suggested in a text like 1 Cor. 11:30 about how some have died for taking the Lord’s Supper inappropriately.” (Bock, *Acts*, 220.)

Eve fall into sin (Gen 3). After humanity began to spread outside of Eden, the sons of God and the daughters of men intermingle (Gen 6:1–4). After God’s mighty intervention in the exodus from Egypt, Israel manufactures the golden calf at Mount Sinai (Exod 32). Not long after God had made David king of Israel, he kills Uriah after becoming intimate with his wife (2 Sam 11). Some, therefore, take these episodes as background for our passage: “Now a husband and wife again sin at an early stage of the Christian church and disrupt the idyllic story of the church’s beginnings. Satan is said to be at work once again.”<sup>5</sup>

This interpretation need not force us to understand Luke as having “intended to paint an ‘idyllic’ picture of the church in Acts 1–4.”<sup>6</sup> In Acts 1:7, Jesus rebuked his disciples’ question, and in Acts 1:11, the angels who appeared at Jesus’ ascension prodded the apostles to get on with the mission that Jesus had given to them. In the midst of many good things happening, there is also room for growth.

At the same time, however, this passage does not represent a small error on the part of Ananias and Sapphira. Luke writes this very clearly to depict a full-blown act of hypocrisy. Calvin, noting this, argues that Satan takes up the “wonderful wiles of hypocrisy” to “assault the Church, when he cannot prevail by open war.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, the Lord will use even this instance of hypocrisy to benefit and build up the whole church.

As Luke narrates this act, he insists twice that the husband and wife act together. First, Ananias sold a piece of property “with his wife Sapphira” (v. 1). Then, Luke insists that, “with his wife’s knowledge” he acted by keeping “back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (v. 2). Lenski observes an important contrast with the previous passage: “Husband and wife were ‘one heart and soul’ (4:32) in evil. Whereas the one should have restrained the other, neither did so, but each aided and abetted the other, both were equally guilty.”<sup>8</sup> Why, though, would they act in this manner together? In appearances, he wanted to look “like Barnabas.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, while he wanted to “purchase a name amongst men,” he was at the same time “greedy of money.”<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, he wanted to have his cake of a generous reputation, and eat it too by using the funds on his own pleasure. Thus, he acted only with an eye toward his own greed and toward the opinions of the church, according to how easily they might be deceived. Yet, he “never thought of God or of Christ who were present in that assembly according to their promise.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, 279–80, citing Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, AB 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 319.

<sup>6</sup> Schnabel expresses this reservation about the interpretation (Schnabel, *Acts*, 280).

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:194.

<sup>8</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 194.

<sup>9</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 156. See also Lenski: “To those who looked on, Ananias appeared as a second Barnabas.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 195.)

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:195.

<sup>11</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 195.

## Deception and Fear (Acts 5:3–6)

When Ananias makes this show of his donation, Peter confronts and rebukes him: “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?’” (v. 3). While Peter does hold Ananias responsible for his actions, he also acknowledges the influence of Satan, who has “filled” Ananias’s heart.<sup>12</sup> Calvin observes that all believers are the objects of Satan’s attack; however, for Ananias’s heart to be “filled” with Satan suggests an entirely different degree of influence: “where Satan possesseth the heart, he reigneth in the whole man, having, as it were, expelled God. This is a sign of a reprobate, to be so addicted and given over to Satan, that the Spirit of God hath no place.”<sup>13</sup>

As a result of Satan’s filling the heart, Peter characterizes Ananias’s actions as an attempt “to lie to the Holy Spirit.” Bruce notes that this action was an attack on the very source of life and unity within the church: “Ananias, in the effort to gain a reputation for greater generosity than he actually deserved, tried to deceive the believing community, but in trying to deceive the community he was really trying to deceive the Holy Spirit, whose life-giving power had created the community and maintained it in being. So real was the apostles’ appreciation of the presence and authority of the Spirit in their midst.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, we again find the verb for “keep back” that also appears in the Greek translation of the story of Achan.<sup>15</sup>

Peter’s next question is important for clarifying the manner in which the early church “had everything in common” (Acts 4:32): “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” (v. 4). As Bock writes, “The question is rhetorical: Why did you do this? The real emotional force of the question is, ‘How can you do this?’”<sup>16</sup> It is not only that Ananias had attempted to deceive the community; in this deed, he had deceived himself. He had lost sight of the fact that the property remained his own while he retained ownership of it, and that, once sold, the proceeds were entirely at his disposal. Yet, he was not content with what he had, but he wanted to get the credit for donating the proceeds from the sale of the property and to hold back some of those proceeds. In pretending as though he was donating the entirety of the proceeds, he had lied—to the community and to himself, but, most egregiously, to God. The greatest aspect of his self-deception, though, centers on the way that he thought he would get away with his deceit, as though God would not see him. In the Psalms, the wicked imagine that God will not see their evil (Pss. 10:11; 64:5; 73:11). As Calvin writes, “For hypocrites do so enwrap themselves in so many shifts, that they think they have nothing to do with God.”<sup>17</sup>

We should notice one other point that Lenski brings out. By first accusing Ananias of lying to the Holy Spirit (v. 3), and then stating, “You have not lied to man but to God” (v. 4), “Peter’s word

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<sup>12</sup> “There is also a figure lurking behind the scenes. Satan is noted as having influenced Ananias and Sapphira. This does not excuse them. It simply means that cosmic forces are very interested in what happens in God’s church, some for ill and others for good.” (Bock, *Acts*, 219.)

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:196.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 113.

<sup>15</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 221–22.

<sup>16</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 223.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:197.

to Ananias undoubtedly identifies God and the Holy Ghost.”<sup>18</sup> This is an essential point for those who deny the full deity of the Holy Spirit, especially when we read this text in conjunction with other passages that connect the Holy Spirit identically with God (1 Cor. 2:11; 2 Cor. 3:18b).

The consequences of this sin come swiftly: “When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last” (v. 5a). Polhill observes that “there is mild irony even in Ananias’s name, whose etymology is ‘God is gracious.’”<sup>19</sup> Yet, while God is gracious, his grace cannot be set in opposition to his righteousness. God is gracious, but he will certainly punish the wicked (see, for example, Ex. 34:6–7). Sadly, rather than trusting in the Lord’s grace, Ananias instead schemed a path forward ahead for himself that involved no small amount of treachery.

How, then, do we see the grace of God in this passage? In part, the Lord is gracious in bringing fear upon the congregation: “And great fear came upon all who heard of it” (v. 5b). As Calvin writes, “This was the Lord’s purpose, by punishing one to make the rest afraid, that they might reverently beware of all hypocrisy.”<sup>20</sup> When sin is tolerated, it tends to spread and grow. When sin is dealt with, the righteous learn to fear. God is gracious, then, when he leads his people to a deeper fear of him.

Very quickly, the church makes arrangements to bury Ananias: “The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him” (v. 6). In part, the haste of this burial reflects the customs of the area not to embalm the bodies of the dead, so that quick decomposition necessitated quicker burial.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, this burial was faster than normal, which reflects the “unusual circumstances” of the situation.<sup>22</sup> As Achan was buried to purge the evil from the midst of the Old Testament Church, so Ananias had to be buried quickly to remove the evil from the midst of the New Testament Church.<sup>23</sup>

## Testing and Fear (Acts 5:7–11)

Three hours later, when Sapphira came in, she did not know what had happened to her husband (v. 7). When Peter asked her to confirm whether they sold the land for the amount of money they had pretended to do so, she confirmed the lie: “Yes, for so much” (v. 8). What a tragedy! As Lenski writes, “This was loyalty but of the wrong kind. With this word Sapphira forfeited her opportunity for repentance. This final ‘yes’ to the sin was yes also to her judgment.”<sup>24</sup>

In response, Peter said, “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” (v. 9). Notice here that the language changes from “lying” to the Holy Spirit (who is God; vv. 3, 4) to “testing the Spirit of the Lord.” As Peterson notes, this language has deep Old Testament

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<sup>18</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 200.

<sup>19</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 156.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:199.

<sup>21</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 202.

<sup>22</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 158.

<sup>23</sup> “The evil one has been cast out from the midst of the people (Deut. 13:5; 17:7, 12; 19:19; 21:21; 24:7; Jervell 1998: 197).” (Bock, *Acts*, 224, citing J. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1972), 197.)

<sup>24</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 204.

significance, especially during the time of Israel's wilderness wanderings: "(e.g., Ex. 17:2, 7; Nu. 14:22; Dt. 6:16; 33:8). In practice it meant provoking God to judge, by misrepresenting him, disobeying his commands, or refusing to believe his promises."<sup>25</sup> The range of the use of this description in the Old Testament is important for clarifying that, while the Achan story may loom large as a parallel, this story is meant to reflect much more of Israel's history as an ongoing concern in the New Testament church. Believers in every age must beware the dangers of testing the Spirit of the Lord.

After this, we see the church taking the same course of response as they had earlier with Ananias: "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" (v. 10). Polhill makes an important observation that this story holds out an important principle for the moral responsibility of women alongside men:

It is striking that "equal time" is given to both the man and the woman. In both his Gospel and in Acts, Luke paired women with men, particularly in contexts of witness and discipleship. Here perhaps he was showing that along with discipleship goes responsibility; and this applies to all disciples, female as well as male. This would have been particularly noteworthy in the Jewish culture of the early Jerusalem church, where a woman's religious status was largely tied up with her father or husband and depended on his faithful execution of the religious responsibilities.<sup>26</sup>

Sapphira is not treated as a passive partner or a victim of her husband's scheming. She is right alongside him when Ananias kept back some of the proceeds for himself at the beginning of this story, and, for her consent, she is buried right alongside Ananias at the end of the story.

The final result—again—is that fear came upon the church: "And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things" (v. 11). Calvin notes that we read here of a "double fear...because the faithful do never so perfectly fear God, but that they profit yet more, being admonished by his judgments."<sup>27</sup> That is, the point of this story is not to find a "'comfortable' solution"—and, indeed, there is none!<sup>28</sup> Just as great fear fell on the company of God's people in the Old Testament, so now this great fear falls on the "church." Importantly, this is the first use of the word "church" in the Book of Acts, a word that is used often in the Gentile word for assemblies (e.g., Acts 19:32, 39, 41), but that is regularly translated as "congregation" or "assembly" of Israel in the Old Testament.<sup>29</sup> This tells us first of all that we are to see continuity between the church and Israel.

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<sup>25</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 212.

<sup>26</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 156.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:202.

<sup>28</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> "The occurrence of the word 'church' (Gk. *ekklesia*) in v. 11 is its first occurrence in the original text of Acts. The Greek word has both a Gentile and a Jewish background. In its Gentile sense it denotes chiefly the citizen-assembly of a Greek city (cf. Ch. 19:32, 39, 41), but it is its Jewish usage that underlies its use to denote the community of believers in Jesus. In the Septuagint it is one of the words used to denote the nation of Israel in its religious character as the 'congregation of Jehovah'; it is a pity that in the ordinary version of the English

Second, this also suggests that Luke wants us to connect our first association with the “church” with a reminder of the importance of the fear of the Lord.

## Discussion Questions

1. What was the overall pattern of generosity in the early church (Acts 4:32, 34–35)? What do we see in the specific example of Barnabas (Acts 4:36–37)? How similar would Ananias and Sapphira have looked to the other members of the church (vv. 1)? What did the Lord know that others could not have? How does this story sound like some of the other sin narratives in the Old Testament (Gen. 3; Gen. 6; Ex. 32; Josh. 7; 2 Sam. 11)? How is it different?
2. What do you think about Peter’s confrontation of Ananias (v. 3)? What does it mean for Satan to have “filled” Ananias’s “heart”? (v. 3a)? In what way did Ananias “lie to the Holy Spirit” (v. 3b)? What does Peter indicate about personal possessions and private property (v. 4a)? Why, then, would Ananias have done what he did (v. 4b)? Why do you think that it would be tempting to lie to God? In what ways are you tempted to do so?
3. In what way did Peter test Sapphira (v. 8)? How is Peter’s testing of Sapphira different from Sapphira’s testing of the Lord (v. 9)? What does it mean to “test the Lord,” and where do we see this phrase appear in the Old Testament? Why do you think that Sapphira was punished for the sin of her husband? Why were the young men so quick to bury both Ananias and also Sapphira after each person died? What does this teach us about the holiness of the church?
4. What do we make of the “double fear” that we see in this passage (vv. 5, 11)? How does the fear of the Lord keep us from hypocrisy? Why does Satan’s filling of Ananias’s heart disrupt Ananias’s sense of fear of the Lord? Why are we called to fear the Lord? Why is the fear of the Lord called the beginning of wisdom/knowledge (Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10)? In what way does the fear of the Lord lead to life rather than death (Prov. 14:27)?

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Bible it should be rendered in NT by a term which does not appear in OT. Readers of the Greek Bible could draw their own conclusions from the use of the word *ekklesia* in OT and NT alike. So could readers of William Tyndale’s English translation when they came upon the word ‘congregation’ in both Testaments.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 116.)