

What Happened to Ananias and Sapphira?

© 2011 Andy Woods

One of the most peculiar stories of the Bible involves the divine slaying of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11. The events of Acts 5:1-11 must be understood in harmony with the communal living arrangement practiced by the early church. Jews, who had traveled to Jerusalem from all over the known world to celebrate the Day of Pentecost (Lev 23:15-22), heard Peter's message concerning the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ (Acts 2:14-36). Three thousand of these Jews trusted in the message of the gospel (Acts 2:41).

Because they had changed their minds about Christ and had gone from being Christ-rejecting Jews to Christ-accepting ones, they needed to learn new doctrine. Since the New Testament was not yet written, they needed to remain in Jerusalem in order to learn doctrine from the apostles (Acts 2:42). However, because their employment was back home and they had originally planned to remain in Jerusalem just a short while, they were without any means of support. Thus, believers in Jerusalem liquidated their property so that they would have available cash in order to support the remaining Jewish believers so that they could remain in Jerusalem in order to learn from the apostles (Acts 2:44-45).

This scenario forms the background of Ananias and Sapphira's decision to sell their property and give the proceeds to the church. Here, they had sold their property and given only part of the proceeds to the church rather than all of the proceeds. At the same time, the couple publicly misrepresented the fact that they had given all the money from the sale to the church. Their sin was *not* that they had kept back part of the proceeds for themselves. Concerning their property, Peter notes, "While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control?" The private ownership and personal control of private property is a concept that abounds in Scripture (Exod 20:15, 17). Rather, their sin related to the fact that they had misrepresented their level of generosity. This sin involved not only a lie to the church but a lie to God (Acts 5:4b).

Although the early church had been attacked externally by the unbelieving Jews, this event marks the first of several internal attacks against the church (See also Acts 6:1-7). Since the church was at a delicate place in its infancy, God dealt drastically with this sin by prematurely terminating the lives of Ananias and Sapphira. Such drastic discipline had a purifying effect on the church by deterring other believers from committing the same sin (Acts 5:11).

What Happened to Ananias and Sapphira?

Ananias and Sapphira seem to have been believers since the rest of the church became afraid as a result of what happened to them (Acts 5:11). It is doubtful that the other believers would be afraid in this manner if only an unbeliever had died. Rather, the church feared since two of their own had been killed. The fact that Satan had filled their hearts (Acts 5:3) does not disqualify them from being believers since Satan can influence Christians who yield to the sin nature (Matt 16:21-23; Eph 4:26-27). While Satanic or demonic possession of Christians is not possible (1 Cor 6:19; Rom 8:9; 1 John 4:4), Satanic oppression or influence can be a reality to the extent that the believer opens the door to such influence by pandering to their sin nature.

Although a believer can never be a candidate for eternal retribution (Rom 5:9; 8:1), God can discipline the believer in order to keep him from practicing sin (Heb 12:5-11; Rev 3:19). Sometimes this discipline can be severe even taking the form of premature death (1 Cor 11:30; 1 John 5:16; Rev 2:23).

What can we learn from this curious event? First, we should not mistakenly conclude that all suffering in the life of the believer emanates from divine discipline regarding personal sin. While sin can be *a* cause of suffering, it is not necessarily *the only* cause of such suffering. There are many scriptural examples of individuals suffering for reasons unrelated to divine discipline over personal sin (Job 1:1; John 9:1-3; Gal 4:13; 2 Cor 12:7-10; 2 Tim 4:20; Jas 1:2-4). Second, God desires practical holiness in His church. Because sin is spiritually contagious (Gal 5:9; 1 Cor 5:6), God sometimes deals with sin drastically so as to prevent it from spreading to the rest of God's people.

Third, the disciplining hand of the Lord is a reality in the life of the Christian. God loves us so much that He may sometimes introduce temporal pain into our lives when we sin. His goal is for us to associate this momentary pain with the sin so that we will be deterred from committing the same sin in the future. When a child runs across the street without looking for oncoming traffic, a loving parent will discipline the child. The goal of such discipline is not to destroy the child but rather to protect the child. The logic of such discipline is that the next time the child contemplates running across the street without looking, he or she will remember the momentary pain associated with the discipline and consequently not run into the street without looking, thereby potentially sparing the child's life. Similarly, God, who understands the horrific consequences of sin (Gal 6:7-8), understands that we have the ability to destroy ourselves in sin. Thus, He may introduce momentary pain through discipline into our lives. The next time we think about sinning we will associate the momentary pain of discipline with sin and consequently avoid the sin altogether. Such avoidance of sin spares us from untold grief and long-term consequences.

What Happened to Ananias and Sapphira?

Fourth, as Christians, we must understand that Satan seeks to influence our lives. By refusing to yield to the sin nature, we prevent Satan from having the influence over us that he desires. Had Ananias and Sapphira not yielded to the temptation of misrepresenting their level of generosity, Satan would have had no influence over them and this tragic episode could have been avoided. It is amazing to discover the things we can learn about God's character and how He works in our lives and churches from this short and sometimes overlooked story of Ananias and Sapphira.