

## 2. Ananias and Sapphira are punished for their hypocrisy (5:1–11)

The story of the deceit and death of this married couple is important for several reasons. It illustrates the honesty of Luke as a historian; he did not suppress this sordid episode. It throws light on the interior life of the first Spirit-filled community; it was not all romance and righteousness <sup>4</sup>. It is also a further example of the strategy of Satan <sup>5</sup>. Several commentators have suggested a parallel between Ananias and Achan—the Achan who stole money and clothing after the destruction of Jericho. Thus Bengel wrote: ‘the sin of Achan and that of Ananias were in many respects similar, at the beginning of the churches of the Old and New Testament respectively’.<sup>4</sup> F. F. Bruce sees a further analogy: ‘The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God.’<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup>

What we are told is that *a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, first sold a piece of property (1) and then, with his wife’s full knowledge (or ‘connivance’, JB), he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet (2).* To all appearances, Barnabas and Ananias did the same thing. Both sold a property. Both brought the proceeds of the sale to the apostles, and both committed it to their disposal. The difference was that Barnabas brought all the sale money, while Ananias brought only a proportion. Thus Ananias and Sapphira perpetuated a double sin, a combination of dishonesty and deceit. At first sight, there was nothing wrong in their withholding part of the sale money. As Peter plainly said later, their property was their own both before and after the sale (see verse 4 below). So they were under no obligation to sell their piece of land or, having sold it, to give away any—let alone all—of the proceeds. That is not the whole story, however. There is something else, something half-hidden. For Luke, in declaring that Ananias kept back part of the money for himself, chooses the verb *nosphizomai*, which means to ‘misappropriate’ (BAGD). The same word was used in LXX of Achan’s theft,<sup>6</sup> and in its only other New Testament occurrence it means to steal.<sup>7</sup> We have to assume, therefore, that before the sale Ananias and Sap-

<sup>4</sup> Bengel, p. 556.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce, *English*, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> Jos. 7:1.

phira had entered into some kind of contract to give the church the total amount raised. Because of this, when they brought only some instead of all, they were guilty of embezzlement. 🗨️

It was not on this sin that Peter concentrated, however, but on the other, hypocrisy. The apostle's complaint was not that they lacked honesty (bringing only a part of the sale price) but that they lacked integrity (bringing only a part, while pretending to bring the whole) 🗨️. They were not so much misers as thieves and—above all—liars. They wanted the credit and the prestige for sacrificial generosity, without the inconvenience of it. So, in order to gain a reputation to which they had no right, they told a brazen lie. Their motive in giving was not to relieve the poor, but to fatten their own ego. 🗨️

Peter saw behind Ananias' hypocrisy the subtle activity of Satan. He confronted Ananias: 'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself [nosphizomai, again] some of the money you received for the land?' (3). Peter accused him both of misappropriation and of falsehood, both of stealing and then of lying about it. But there was no need for either sin. 'Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God' (4). We note in passing that Peter assumes the deity of the Holy Spirit, since to lie to him (3) was to lie to God (4).

*<sup>5</sup>When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup>Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.*

*<sup>7</sup>About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup>Peter asked her, 'Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?'*

*'Yes,' she said, 'that is the price.'*

*<sup>9</sup>Peter said to her, 'How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.'*

*<sup>10</sup>At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup>Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.*

No reply from Ananias to Peter's indictment and questions is recorded. Luke tells us

only that God's judgment fell upon him: 'he dropped dead' (5a, NEB). Understandably *great fear*, the solemnity which is experienced in the presence of the holy God, *seized all who heard what had happened* (5b), even while certain *young men* attended to the burial (6). *About three hours later* the incident repeated itself. Ignorant of her husband's death, Sapphira *came in*. Peter gave her the chance to repent by asking her to state the price they had received for the land, but she merely identified herself with his duplicity (7–8). Peter protested that they had conspired to *test the Spirit of the Lord*, presuming to see whether they could get away with their deception, and warned her that those who had buried her husband would bury her too (9), whereupon *she fell down at his feet and died*, and the young men buried her beside her husband (10). For the second time Luke refers to the great fear which seized the whole church, and indeed all who heard about these events (11).

Many readers of this story are offended by what they regard as the severity of God's judgment. Some even say they 'hope that Ananias and Sapphira are legendary'.<sup>8</sup> Or they try to exonerate God by attributing the death of Ananias and Sapphira instead to Peter who, they say, either laid a curse on them or put them under undue psychological pressure, thus anticipating the use of a modern lie detector. But, even if the anguish of a violated conscience contributed to their death on the human level, Luke clearly intends us to understand that it was a work of divine judgment. Once this has been accepted, there are at least three valuable lessons for us to learn.

First, the gravity of their sin. Peter stressed this by repeating that their lie was not directed primarily against him, but against the Holy Spirit, that is, against God. And God hates hypocrisy. Luke has recorded Jesus' denunciation of it,<sup>9</sup> together with his warning that those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit (in deliberate defiance of known truth) will not be forgiven (Lk. 12:10). Yet the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was also against the church. Is it intentional that Luke here uses for the first time the word *ekklēsia* (11)? He thus affirms the continuity of the Christian community with God's redeemed and gathered people in the Old Testament.<sup>10</sup> Luke seems to be underlining

<sup>8</sup> W. L. Knox, quoted by Haenchen, p. 237.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Lk. 6:42; 12:1, 56; 13:15.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ekklēsia* in 7:38 and in LXX of, e.g., Jos. 8:35.

the great evil of sinning against God's people. Falsehood ruins fellowship. If the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira had not been publicly exposed and punished, the Christian ideal of an open fellowship would not have been preserved, and the modern cry 'there are so many hypocrites in the church' would have been heard from the beginning.

The second lesson to be learned concerns the importance, even the sacredness, of the human conscience. Luke will later record Paul's claim before Felix that he always strove to keep his 'conscience clear before God and man' (Acts 24:16). This seems to be what John meant by 'walking in the light'. It is to live a transparent life before God, without guile or subterfuge, whose consequence is that 'we have fellowship with one another'.<sup>11</sup> The 'brethren' of the East African revival, who lay great stress on this teaching, amusingly illustrate it by expressing their desire to 'live in a house without ceiling or walls', that is, to permit nothing to come between them and either God or other people. It was this openness which Ananias and Sapphira failed to maintain.

Thirdly, the incident teaches the necessity of church discipline. Although physical death may have continued in some situations as a penalty for those sins which 'despise the church of God',<sup>12</sup> it came to be associated with excommunication.<sup>13</sup> The church has tended to oscillate in this area between extreme severity (disciplining members for the most trivial offences) and extreme laxity (exercising no discipline at all, even for serious offences). It is a good general rule that secret sins should be dealt with secretly, private sins privately, and only public sins publicly. Churches are also wise if they follow the successive stages taught by Jesus.<sup>14</sup> Usually the offender will be brought to repentance before the final stage of excommunication is reached. But offences which are serious in themselves, have become a public scandal, and have not been repented of, should be judged. Presbyterians are right to 'fence the table', that is, to make access to the Lord's Supper conditional. For, although the Lord's table is open to sinners (who else either needs or wishes to come to it?), it is open only to penitent sinners.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Jn. 1:7.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. 1 Cor. 11:22, 29.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20.

<sup>14</sup> Mt. 18:15ff.

We have now seen that, if the devil's first tactic was to destroy the church by force from without, his second was to destroy it by falsehood from within. He has not given up the attempt, whether by the hypocrisy of those who profess but do not practise, or by the stubbornness of those who sin but do not repent. The church must preserve its vigilance. ✎