

Notes for Sunday 18th July 2021

Acts 5:1-11 Ananias and Sapphira

A perfect church?

This first church has progressed by leaps and bounds! Where once they had hidden away from their enemies (Acts 1), now they were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), seeing miracles of healing and speaking boldly about Jesus (Acts 3) and standing up to the enemies they once lived in fear of (Acts 4). We finished Acts 4 (v32-37) by seeing how they overcame selfishness by sharing their lives and possessions with each other, so that 'there were no needy persons among them' (4:34).

So, was this a perfect church? And, if so, does it encourage or depress us? How can we move from the day-to-day realities of our lives to what they experienced?

Beware thinking any church is perfect! If you ever find a perfect church, don't join it. Because you and I aren't perfect and, if we join it, it won't be perfect any more!

This church actually had its own problems, which is an encouragement to us. They had to learn to face up to those problems while being faithful to Jesus, just like we do.

We'll look at some of those problems over the next few weeks, such as:

- Moral failures of some of its members (Acts 5:1-11, this week)
- Arguments among different ethnic groups about whether they were being treated fairly (Acts 6:1-7)
- Persecution turning hot, and people being killed because of their faith in Jesus (Acts 7)

Sin found out

Ananias and Sapphira were condemned in the most drastic fashion for a particular sin, but what exactly was it? It was something to do with money, but money wasn't the whole story.

Note: This was not a punishment imposed by the church or anyone in it. It was seen as an act of God, interpreted as such by Peter.

The culture of the church was generous giving (Acts 4:32-35), and the example of some, such as Barnabas, was picked out for particular note (4:36-37). Presumably this gave them a lot of esteem in the church.

Ananias and Sapphira wanted some of that same esteem, but without the associated cost of giving generously – so they held back some of the money while, at the same time, claiming they were giving everything. Peter called this 'lying to the Holy Spirit' (5:3).

The principle is that their possessions were their own, to do with as they saw fit (5:4). Generosity is encouraged, but giving should always be voluntary. We also like the idea that giving should be anonymous – to avoid the sin of Ananias and Sapphira.

The way we handle possessions and money is a good measure of our spiritual life, and Jesus spoke about them quite often. Examples are:

- Doing good and giving without ‘blowing your own trumpet’ to draw attention to yourself (Matthew 6:1-4). Don’t even make a big thing about it to yourself (v3, ‘don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing’).
- Not spending our whole lives worrying about possessions (Matthew 6:19-21). Instead work for ‘treasures in heaven’ (v20).

The apostle Paul talks (1 Tim 6:10) about the love of money being ‘a root of all kinds of evil’ by which ‘some have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs’.

So, the way we think about and handle money and possessions is important. Getting it wrong is one example of a desire that can come to control us – others are being dominated by a desire for sexual gratification or for the applause and esteem of other people. If we let these dominate, they’re like a cancer eating away at our spiritual lives. We torment ourselves with desires that can’t be fully satisfied.

The fear of the Lord

The fact that Ananias and Sapphira died over something that we might not consider too major a problem is alarming. On those terms, should we expect to last out to the end of the service, let alone tomorrow? Why the severity?

It’s only a partial answer, but one way of looking at it is the consequence of what happened: (5:11) ‘great fear seized the whole church’.

There are times in the life of God’s people when he comes especially close. When the Holy Spirit is visibly present, when there are miracles and healings, when preaching the gospel brings thousands to believe. And we love those times! We call it revival.

But the God who comes in power, is also the God who is holy. Think back to when we looked at Exodus. God’s holy presence on Mount Sinai was a terrifying experience for the Israelites (Exodus 19). God’s holiness is like an unapproachable light, showing up all our sin and imperfection.

The two – God’s power to act and bless, and his holiness, cannot be separated. He is one God. And, when he comes close, he wants to deal with our sins, even the ones we cherish most. And so, true revival also involves brokenness, and repentance (turning away from sin and committing ourselves to live God’s way). One without the other tends to be short-lived.

So, at this critical point in the life of the church, they were reminded of God’s holiness, of how high his standards of personal behaviour are. Acts 5:11 uses the word ‘fear’, and fear can be a good thing – we call it the ‘fear of the Lord’. It keeps us on our toes. It reminds us of what really matters. And it encourages us to work for the things that build our spiritual health, rather than open us to the desires that drag us down.

Our ultimate example of living a holy life is Jesus himself. And he didn’t do it by hiding away from the world, but by being involved right in the middle of its mess and muddle. How does that help us understand what a holy life might mean for us?

Connect Group questions

Readings: Acts 5:1-11

- What have we learned about the life of this early church over the past few weeks? Do you find it easy or difficult to relate our life to what they experienced? What encouragement can you draw from their story?
- Our attitude to money and possessions can be one of the desires that come to dominate us, to our harm. I've given some principles above we can learn to help us live God's way instead. Can you summarise some principles of your own you can try to live by? What harms can we do to ourselves in this area? What do we find difficult? How can we help each other?
- Does what happened to Ananias and Sapphira seem unduly severe for what they did? How do we compare? Does the explanation above seem plausible to you? Have you longed for revival, and signs of God's power? Do you also long for him to deal with our sins when he comes close? Can we have one without the other?
- Think quietly to yourself, what things in your own life would be challenged by encountering God's holiness? How does 'the fear of the Lord' help us face up to dealing with these things? How does the final comment, about Jesus showing us what a holy life looks like in the middle of the mess and muddle of life, help us?